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Joseph Ritson and the Publication of Early English Literature  
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PhD in English Literature  
University of Edinburgh  
2018





**Declaration**

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Portions of the final chapter have been published, in a condensed form, as a journal article:

“‘Dignified sensibility and friendly exertion’”: Joseph Ritson and George Ellis’s Metrical Romance(ë)s.’ *Romantik: Journal for the Study of Romanticisms* 5.1 (2016): 87-109. DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7146/rom.v5i1.26422>.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the work of antiquary and scholar Joseph Ritson (1752-1803) in publishing significant and influential collections of early English and Scottish literature, including the first collection of medieval romance, by going beyond the biographical approaches to Ritson's work typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts, incorporating an analysis of Ritson's contributions to specific fields into a study of the context which made his work possible. It makes use of the 'Register of Manuscripts Sent to the Reading Room of the British Museum' to shed new light on Ritson's use of the manuscript collections of the British Museum. The thesis argues that Ritson's early polemic attacks on Thomas Warton, Thomas Percy, and the editors of Shakespeare allowed Ritson to establish his own claims to expertise and authority, built upon the research he had already undertaken in the British Museum and other public and private collections. Through his publications, Ritson experimented with different strategies for organizing, systematizing, interpreting and presenting his research, constructing very different collections for different kinds of texts, and different kinds of readers. A comparison of Ritson's three major collections of songs – *A Select Collection of English Songs* (1783), *Ancient Songs* (1790), and *Scottish Songs* (1794) – demonstrates some of the consequences of his decisions, particularly the distinction made between English and Scottish material. Although Ritson's *Robin Hood* (1795) is the most frequently reprinted of his collections, and one of the best studied, approaching this work within the immediate context of Ritson's research and other publications, rather than its later reception, offers some explanation for its more idiosyncratic features. Finally, Ritson's *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* (1802) provides a striking example of Ritson's participation in collaborative networks and the difficulty of finding an audience and a market for editions of early English literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century.





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## Introduction

Since his death, Joseph Ritson's life and legacy have been contested. Scholarship on Ritson has been cumulative, each successive account built upon, directly or indirectly, some subset of the previous work. This introduction begins with a brief overview of the features of Ritson's biography relevant to the present thesis before providing an account of the ways in which Ritson's life and work were presented, interpreted, and contested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For many of Ritson's early biographers and critics, the presentation of Ritson's life and work was closely tied to their understanding of themselves and their own place in the study and publication of early English literature. As such, their accounts are an invaluable record of the reception of Ritson, and of the changing status of the study and publication of early English literature, but as a record of Ritson's life and immediate context need to be approached cautiously.

Bertrand H. Bronson's biography, *Joseph Ritson: Scholar-at-Arms* (1938), remains an irreplaceable resource, providing thorough documentation of Ritson's life and a comprehensive bibliography. I have been able to identify a very few archival resources unknown to Bronson, most significantly the 'Register of Manuscripts Sent to the Reading Room of the British Museum', which provides an invaluable record of Ritson's research.<sup>1</sup> However, like the earlier accounts, Bronson is narrowly focused on Ritson as an individual.

Ritson was born in Stockton-on-Tees in 1752. His background was humble, although exactly how humble has been one of the points of debate between his early biographers. At the age of seventeen, he was indentured to the solicitor John Raisbeck (Bronson 41). A few years later, his articles were transferred to Ralph Bradley, a respected barrister who specialized in conveyancing (41-43). While still a young man in Stockton, Ritson began to establish many of the friendships which would later prove influential, including the novelist Thomas Holcroft, the composer William Shield, and the poet John Cunningham (28-32). He began to participate in

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the British Association for Romantic Studies for the award of a Stephen Copley Research bursary, which allowed me to travel to London to consult this register.

local antiquarian networks, researching local history and establishing warm friendships with other local scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds, including George Allan and Robert Harrison (45). As Bronson has established, Ritson made several contributions of teenage verse to a local magazine, *The Literary Register*, demonstrating a developing taste for irreverent satire (15-25). Ritson developed strong opinions about spelling reform, adopting his own system to different degrees in different texts, beginning with some of his earliest contributions to *The Literary Register*. Some of these choices were ideological, such as a refusal to capitalize 'god', 'i', or titles, while others reflected a conviction that a greater regard to etymology could solve a number of textual problems. Generally this takes the form of a tendency to preserve the spelling of a word regardless of any inflection, while employing either a diaeresis or an apostrophe to manage the resulting combinations of letters (e.g. 'onely', 'centurys', 'romanceës', 'discover'd', 'aquire'd'). He generally eschews apostrophes in possessives. When different variants were in use, he often had strong preferences, most significantly for 'Shakspeare' and 'Scotish'. His spellings will be retained here.

As a young man he became a committed vegetarian, a decision he later attributed to Bernard de Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (Bronson 35). Ritson's vegetarian principles were well known during his life, and became a frequent source of humour at his expense, featuring prominently in the caricature produced by James Sayers in 1803. Although there were different strains of vegetarian thought at the time, Ritson's was closely tied to atheism and political radicalism, reflecting a refusal to accept conventional hierarchies. At its heart was the conviction that a young man could look at the world around him and conclude, with no reference to any authorities, and certainly not religious authorities, that there was something deeply wrong in the social, moral, legal, and economic structures of his society, and resolve to live by his own ethical code.<sup>2</sup> When Ritson came of age in 1773 he made

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<sup>2</sup> For vegetarianism and radicalism, see Timothy Morton's *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (1994) and *Radical Food: The Culture and Politics of Eating and Drinking, 1790-1820* (2000). Morton's article 'Joseph Ritson, Percy Shelley and the Making of Romantic Vegetarianism' examines the connections between Ritson and Shelley, who owned and annotated a copy of Ritson's manifesto, *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty*.

his first trip to Edinburgh, where he was delighted with the resources available in the Advocates' Library and the city's many bookshops, but had trouble finding anything to eat (Bronson 48-49).

In 1775 he moved to London, where he began to establish himself professionally as a conveyancer and began an extraordinary programme of research in the British Museum, supplemented by trips to the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge. In 1782 he published his first literary antiquarian work, an attack on Thomas Warton: *Observations on the Three First Volumes of The History of English Poetry in a Familiar Letter to the Author*. This was quickly followed by an attack on the recent edition of Shakespeare edited by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, *Remarks, Critical and Illustrative, on the Text and Notes of the Last Edition of Shakspeare* (1783). The first chapter of this thesis will address these early polemic works, placing them within the larger context of a literary culture characterized by both controversy and collaboration. These works allowed Ritson to establish his own claims to authority by challenging some of the most respected figures working on early English literature. Through these works, Ritson presented himself to his contemporaries as a 'student of the British Museum'. The second chapter will explore how Ritson conducted his research, and the ways in which access to the collections of the British Museum made the work of Ritson and others possible. The records of Ritson's research demonstrate that he began to study literary texts immediately after his arrival in London. However, I argue that Ritson's approach to these texts was influenced by his early legal and antiquarian training, and the combination of these influences – access to the founding collections of the British Museum and the application of an antiquarian sensibility to literary texts – made some of Ritson's most significant contributions to the study of early English literature possible.

Ritson did not long confine himself to polemic, though the feuds began in these works shaped the reception of his texts during his life and after his death. Preparing his collections and catalogues, Ritson struggled with the problem of organization and selection, winnowing and dividing his research to produce his published works. He made close examinations of an extraordinary range of manuscript and printed works, isolating and selecting texts by language, subject,

genre, and his own nebulous ideas of merit, recombining and presenting them in printed collections. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address some of the choices Ritson made in organizing his material, following his division of his major works on song into English, Ancient and Scottish collections respectively. In each work he made, and described, very different choices about how to present his material, for different ends and different audiences.

*A Select Collection of English Songs* (1783) was a beautiful and elegant collection, informed by Ritson's antiquarian research and sensibilities but calculated to appeal to a more general audience. While he prepared expensive, beautifully printed collections in London, he published smaller works in Stockton, including an early collection of nursery rhymes, *Gammer Gurton's Garland* (c. 1783) and a local collection of songs, *The Bishopric Garland: or, Durham Minstrel* (1784). In 1784 he was able to secure an appointment as Bailiff of the Liberty of the Savoy, a position which entailed more work and less profit than he had hoped, but ensured a moderate income (Bronson 611-612). In addition to his literary antiquarian works, he compiled a number of legal works, mostly relating to this position.

Between his attack on Warton in 1782 and his death in 1803, Ritson was extraordinarily prolific. He published further criticism of the editors of Shakespeare: *The Quip Modest* (1788) in response to the republication of Johnson and Steeven's edition revised by Reed, and *Cursory Criticisms on the Edition of Shakspeare Published by Edmond Malone* (1792). In these polemic works, as he had done earlier, Ritson outlines and displays his own editorial principles. He planned his own edition of Shakespeare's plays, and although this was never completed Shakespearean research had a pervasive influence on his work. He published further collections of songs, including the major collections of *Ancient Songs, From the Time of King Henry the Third, to the Revolution* (1790) and *Scottish Songs* (1794) as well as the smaller local collections *The Yorkshire Garland* (1788), *The Northumberland Garland; or, Newcastle Nightingale* (1793) and *The North-Country Chorister* (1802). He published two closely-related collections of early ballads with vignettes by the Bewicks, *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry: From Authentic Manuscripts and Old Printed Copies* (1791) and *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated English*

*Outlaw* (1795). Like the earlier *Select Collection of English Songs*, the *English Anthology* (1793-94) was an elegant collection for a general audience, although informed by his antiquarian research. Ritson became increasingly politically radical during the 1790s, in ways which influenced his treatment of Robin Hood and the reception of that collection, as will be addressed in Chapter 4.

Although Ritson had been researching medieval literary texts since his arrival in London, he did not publish any editions of these texts until the *Ancient Songs* (1790), Laurence Minot's *Poems on Interesting Events in the Reign of King Edward III* (1795), and the first collection of medieval romance, *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* (1802). Chapter 6 will discuss this influential work, as well as Ritson's sometimes uneasy place within a collaborative network of men working with and editing medieval romance at the turn of the century, including Walter Scott, George Ellis, Thomas Park, Francis Douce, John Leyden and Richard Heber.

Shortly before his death Ritson completed the *Bibliographia Poetica: A Catalogue of Engleish Poets, of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Centurys, with a Short Account of their Works* (1802). Comprehensive at the time it was published, but quickly out-of-date as the study of early English texts progressed, this work functioned, as Bronson demonstrates, as a 'short-title catalogue' during the nineteenth century, and Bronson has located a number of copies owned and heavily used and annotated by nineteenth-century scholars (268, 779). Many other works were nearly complete at the time of his death. As will be addressed in Chapter 5, Ritson had a long-standing interest in Scottish song, poetry, and history, and enjoyed close friendships and correspondences with antiquaries in Scotland, despite the persona of 'Anti-Scot' that he developed during his feud with John Pinkerton. He planned Scottish companions to most of his major English works, but only *Scotish Songs* reached print in his lifetime. The 'Bibliographia Scotica' was completed shortly before Ritson's death, and although it was never published it circulated in manuscript as a resource for Scottish historians in the nineteenth century. *The Caledonian Muse* has a more complex history. Letters from Joseph Frank to David Laing, unknown to Bronson, shed further light on the development and significance of this collection.

In the preface to the *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*, Ritson describes that work as ‘Brought to an end with much industry and more attention, in a continue’d state of il-health, and low spirits’ (iii). The first years of the nineteenth century, and the final years of his life, were busy ones for Ritson, marked throughout by ‘much industry’, ‘il-health’, and ‘low spirits’. He had been in poor health for many years, reporting in his letters the frustration of insomnia and loss of memory, admitting to his nephew in 1798 that: ‘I am apprehensive of an entire loss of memory; as I am daily forgetting the most common words in the language: and you would be surprised to learn the trouble and vexation which this foolish letter has cost me’ (*Letters* II: 166). His health continued to deteriorate, and in 1800 he wrote to Joseph Cooper Walker, the Irish antiquary, to thank him for his ‘kind & friendly enquirys respecting my health, which i have no reasonable expectation of ever recovering. I have tryed the mustard-pils, as wel as several other specificks without the slightest effect’ (Bronson 241). In March 1801, Ritson wrote to his old friend Robert Harrison, congratulating him on surviving to see the new century (Harrison was then eighty-six, Ritson forty-eight):

I hope your days will be as long as you yourself can desire, and that every day will furnish an increase of content and happiness. You know my sentiments with regard to other worlds, which, I believe, are not likely to change. My health is much impaired, my frame disordered, and my spirits depressed; so that I have no hopes for myself of an eternal existence; and am rather, in fact, disposed to wonder that I have already lived so long: having had the mortification to see many whom I loved and esteemed drop from time to time around me at a much more immature age. (*Letters* II: 205-206)

By the end of the year, Thomas Park wrote to Robert Anderson to report that ‘Ritson is a good deal indisposed by an affection of the diaphragm. “Hard study & spare diet,” are likely in my opinion to abbreviate his existence. He gets no sleep, tho’ he has tried the most powerful narcotics, & has had recourse to every medical expedient’ (Bronson 261). Ritson wrote again to Harrison in February 1802, reporting that earlier that year:



I was looked upon one day as a dying man, having received a stroke of the apoplexy, by which, for the space of twenty-four hours, or thereabout, I was entirely deprived of memory, intellect, and speech; but got relief by the application to my temples of leeches and blisters. This was thought a narrow escape, and the next attack, I suppose, will carry me off. (*Letters II*: 216)

When John Leyden passed through London before making his voyage to India, he had a distressing meeting with Ritson, which he described to Richard Heber:

Ritson has just been with me in a great fury at the whole world particularly at God Almighty and the absurd custom of printing his name in capitals just as if the old gentleman above were to look down in a great passion and to say Damn you why don't you print my name with proper respect in capitals. He is however very nearly convinced of the existence of ghosts, and admits that some damned malicious being pesters his chamber by knocking at his inner door in such a frightful stile all night over for the mere purpose of preventing him from sleeping, and then staring at him with such ghastly faces. (37)<sup>3</sup>

Despite these troubles, Leyden reported that Ritson was still hard at work on his 'Life of Arthur', later published posthumously. In April Ritson wrote to his nephew that 'I have had two attacks of the apoplexy; and labour, in fact, under a variety of complaints, for which I can obtain no effectual relief, and from which I can never expect to be free' (*Letters II*: 220). A will dated 7 September 1803 directed that his belongings be sold and his body buried 'with the least possible ceremony, attendance, or expence, without the presence of a clergyman, and my coffin being previously, carefully and effectually filled with quick lime' (Bronson 291). These instructions, with the exception of the quicklime, were carried out by his nephew and executor, Joseph Frank, when Ritson died later that month.

Ritson's letters reveal a man who was falling apart physically and mentally. Ritson's early biographers have placed considerable emphasis on his perceived

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<sup>3</sup> Leyden's letters to Heber, and a single letter to Ellis, are held in the Bodleian Library. A typed transcript of these letters is held by the National Library of Scotland as MS 939.

madness, attributing many features of his work, in different ways and to different ends, to a fundamental unsoundness. Establishing the nature of Ritson's illness and its relationship to his work is beyond the scope of this thesis. Without denying that Ritson was ill, I argue that all surviving accounts of his illness are, transparently, the result of deliberate attempts to establish and promote very specific narratives about his life and work, and should be approached cautiously, with an awareness of the context within which they were produced.

Ritson's death played out in the same factional periodical culture in which his works had been received during his lifetime. The brief notice of his death in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of October 1803 identified him as 'Joseph Ritson, esq. a conveyancer, of Gray's inn, deputy high-bailiff of the duchy of Lancaster, and a man of information, but more to be commended for his acuteness than for his good-breeding or candour' before moving on to an incomplete list of his publications, with brief evaluations of his behaviour: the *Observations* on Warton were 'one of the most illiberal productions we ever recollect to have seen', while the comments on Reed's edition of Shakespeare were 'particularly illiberal' (987-988). William Godwin provided a more generous assessment for the *Monthly Magazine* of November 1803 (later reprinted in the *Monthly Mirror* in May 1805), describing Ritson as:

greatly distinguished for the acuteness of his judgement, and the profoundness of his researches, in the characters of a consulting barrister and a conveyancer. But his literary enquiries were by no means confined within the limits of his profession; and he was, perhaps, the most successful of those persons by whom the investigation of old English literature and antiquities was cultivated in the later part of the eighteenth century. (375)

However, after praising his impressive memory, 'indefatigable enquires', and 'penetration and judgement', Godwin declares that 'It is to be regretted that his style, and the mode in which he communicated his discoveries to the public, were by no means such as to adorn his discoveries' (375). Ritson's discoveries are divided from their presentation, suggesting that the latter was unfortunate but superficial. Godwin interprets Ritson's transgressions charitably, arguing that 'Mr Ritson was fully sensible of the superiority he possessed in those points of learning which had

engaged his attention, and was not accustomed to express himself on these subjects with any degree of diffidence and reserve' (375). Indeed, Godwin, who was friendly with Ritson (he is mentioned 231 times in Godwin's diary), makes an explicit defence of Ritson's character:

To the attainments which he has made in knowledge, Mr. Ritson added many excellent virtues of the heart – He was liberal in the disposition of his income, and ever ready to relieve merit in distress. – He had great ingenuousness and integrity of disposition, never allowing himself in any sort of pretence and imposition, practising rigidly, in his conduct, the moral judgement of his understanding, and constantly abstaining from the commission of any thing he felt to be wrong. (376)

Godwin links this rigidity to Ritson's vegetarianism and political radicalism, noting the real risks he undertook in his support of the French Revolution. Godwin concludes with an incomplete bibliography and a note that Ritson's library 'will shortly be brought to the hammer' (376)

The reviews of Ritson's final works (*The Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food*, *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*, and the *Bibliographia Poetica*) generally appeared after his death, and responded to it in different ways. *The British Critic*, which had a long and complex relationship with Ritson's work, presented him as fundamentally unbalanced, a warning to others. While this is relatively restrained in the review of the *Romanceës*, the review of the *Essay* is more extreme, as a notice of his death is appended to the review:

We had written thus far, when we were informed that he was no more! How fearful are the ways of heaven! The fool, who, in the pride of his no-knowledge, arraigned the wisdom of Providence; the worm that, in the conceit of his no-strength, aspired to pull the Almighty from his throne, sunk, in the twinkling of an eye, beneath the level of the lowest and most contemptible of beasts that perish! It is said that he was found naked, at midnight, in the court of his inn, with a large clasp-knife in one hand, and a copper kettle in the other, on which he was exercising his impotent fury. The humanity of the neighbours

conveyed him to a mad-house, where, in the course of a few hours, he expired in a paroxysm of frenzy. (89)

Ritson's death becomes a morality tale, one in which all of Ritson's behaviour can be seen as the product of a dangerous and unhealthy lack of restraint ultimately leading to his death.

From his earliest publications, Ritson had made enemies, particularly Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, Edmond Malone, and John Pinkerton. Those who survived him took an active role in establishing Ritson's legacy. When Percy heard of Ritson's death he began a concerted and deliberate campaign to control the reception of Ritson's life and work. He replies to a letter from Robert Anderson informing him of Ritson's death with the reflection, 'wretched Man! – His Insanity I think may be traced in most of his critical Attempts', and in a letter to Malone that 'The wretched man's turbulent & ferocious Spirit had ended in Insanity' (Bronson 293). For Percy, there was much to be gained by attributing Ritson's criticism of him to madness.

Several of Percy's correspondents first learned of Ritson's death from Percy. In a letter responding to Percy's account of Ritson's death, Malone recognizes and challenges the competing accounts:

It is odd enough that the first intelligence I received of the maniac Ritson's death was from your Lordship... It was never, I believe, mentioned in any of the Newspapers. But to make up for their silence; there is a most flaming eulogy on him in the Monthly Magazine, a very proper recorder of such detestable characters.

After a paraphrase of the account found in the *British Critic*, Malone continues:

Mr. Nares [the editor of the *British Critic*] has given an admirable (though short) review of his frantick book on animal food; and lashes him very adroitly. But the Gent. Magazine, where his whole conduct through life, and the general character of all his writings ought to have been exposed, lets him off much too easily. – His books sold ridiculously high, for about 700£ tho' he had had a sale or two before. The book sellers were absurd enough to give above £100 for his unpublished notes on Shakspeare; & mean to print them; I suppose, to weigh agt. my edition, when it shall appear. (Bronson 298)

Malone's account recognizes the ways in which the responses to Ritson were shaped by the political and religious commitments of the periodicals in which they appeared, in which the *Monthly Magazine* predictably offers a very different account from the *British Critic*. Malone's annotated copy of the catalogue for this auction survives in the British Library (821.g.20). His manuscript notes identify the 'Well-Known Collector' of the catalogue as 'Atheist Ritson', and describe him as 'a petty attorney and draftsman, and a more petty annotator of Shakespeare'. While Percy is primarily concerned with Ritson's attacks on his own work, Malone sees him as principally a rival Shakespearian, who poses a threat even in death. While Malone applauded Nares' approach, for others it went too far. Walter Scott wrote to Robert Surtees some years later, reflecting that 'I was very indignant at the insult offered to his memory, in one of the periodical publications, after his decease, imputing the unfortunate malady with which he was afflicted to providential vengeance and retribution, for which the editor, in exact retributive justice, deserved to be damned for a brutal scoundrel' (*Letters Of Walter Scott* I: 356). Scott offered a more nuanced response in his own review of the *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* in the *Edinburgh Review*.

Early in 1804, Percy solicited sensational accounts of Ritson's final days from his neighbours, writing to H.C. Selby, another inhabitant of Gray's Inn, to request information about Ritson's 'Character, Conduct & Principles' (Burd 204). Selby procured a statement from Robert Smith, another neighbour, questioned him further on Ritson's atheism, and interviewed Elizabeth Kirby, a native of Stockton and Ritson's laundress, reporting his findings to Percy (204). Percy circulated these accounts privately, ultimately ensuring their publication as an appendix to Robert Cromek's *Select Scottish Songs* (1810) (Bronson 310). In this account, Robert Smith<sup>4</sup> 'frequently heard a great swearing and noise in his chambers', eventually leading to a confrontation during which Ritson attempted to burn his papers, threatened to stab anyone who tried to stop him, and claimed that he was 'writing a pamphlet proving Jesus Christ an imposter' (Cromek I: 226-229). Later that night, 'he became very

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<sup>4</sup> He is unnamed in Cromek. However, Alfred Burd located and published the original letters.

violent and outrageous, throwing his furniture about his chambers and breaking his windows', and once again had to be disarmed before being taken to an asylum in Hoxton where he died (229-230). Cromek's appendix is introduced with the reflection that it 'may afford gratification to some of those who suffered under the lash of his sarcastic criticism' and that it may 'offer some apology for that eccentricity and violence which too frequently disgrace his controversial writings and even his antiquarian disquisitions' by demonstrating that his offences 'originated in that maniacal tendency which latterly burst forth into full outrage' (224). The account of his death is supplemented by reports from 'a Mrs. Kirby, who knew him from early infancy' that 'his father was a man in a low condition of life', that as a child 'his habits were always reserved, rarely associating with his school-fellows', that he 'never...paid much attention to the proper business of his profession' and that he was 'very lax in his religious principles' (Cromek I: 224-225). This formulation allows the pious reflection that this account could provide 'a warning to others to be careful how they throw aside any proper restraint of the mind, especially the most serious and important of all, that of religion, lest they should slacken, and, as took place in his unhappy case, ultimately lose all hold of the reins by which the imagination is guided' (225).

Until his own death in 1811, Percy jealously monitored references to Ritson. He was outraged, and shared his outrage widely, when Walker, who had unsuccessfully attempted to make peace between Ritson and Percy, dared to include a footnote to an essay directing readers to Ritson's *Romanceës* without condemning Ritson or mentioning Percy (Bronson 305-309). When he read an announcement that Henry Weber would shortly publish a collection of romances, he sent a letter to Robert Anderson, who had been friendly with both Ritson and Percy, to demand information and attempt to influence the collection:

If Dr Anderson is acquainted with Mr Weber, the Bp would be glad to know in what forwardness is this publication and if not too late, the Bp perhaps could furnish him with some information on the subject which formerly had very much engaged his attention. At any rate the Bp would wish to know if Mr Weber has entered into any Critical Examination of the gross mistakes, and wilful misrepresentations of

Ritson, who from his insane malignity has studiously perverted their Chronological Arrangement & committed other mis statements [*sic*] (*Percy Letters* 308; also qtd in Bronson 309).

Weber's collection, as will be seen, was presented as the continuation of Ritson's work. Percy conducted a deliberate campaign to control Ritson's reputation, seeing it as intertwined with his own. This was not entirely a personal conflict between two very different men. Percy closely monitored references to himself and carefully cultivated his reputation as editor of the *Reliques*. For example, when Richard Graves suggested in his *Recollections of some Particulars in the Life of the late William Shenstone Esq.* that Shenstone had played a larger role in the formation of the *Reliques* than Percy had given him credit for, Percy demanded a letter of retraction. When he sent a copy of the 1794 edition of the *Reliques* to Anderson he sent him a copy of this letter (*Percy Letters* 16, 26). Although their correspondence at this point was primarily concerned with Anderson's requests for James Grainger's papers, it was important to Percy that Anderson understand that Graves was mistaken, and knew himself to be mistaken.

During the 1820s and 30s, there was a revival of interest in Ritson, and in the study of early English material more generally. Several different accounts of Ritson's life and work were produced at this time, for different reasons and from different quarters, often borrowing from one another. During his early life in Stockton, Ritson had been interested in local antiquarian research, and he continued to collect material on the history of Stockton and the county of Durham alongside his literary research. He eventually resigned this material to John Brewster, supplying him with information for his *Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton-upon-Tees* (1796), although Ritson was critical of the work in his letters (Bronson 5; *Letters* II: 125-28). Shortly before his death, Ritson was introduced to the younger antiquary Robert Surtees. As noted above, Scott and Surtees corresponded about their warm memories of Ritson, and Surtees incorporated a memoir of Ritson into the chapter on Stockton in his *History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham* (1823), emphasizing Ritson's early years and his local connections. Surtees draws a portrait of an early explorer of 'that black-letter literature which has been since so popular', who 'revelled in stores then but little explored' in the British Museum, describing how

‘by occasional visits, or by his correspondents, he extracted many a gem from the Bodleian, or from the fairy treasures of Bene’t and Magdalen’. Surtees makes the requisite acknowledgement of Ritson’s unacceptable behaviour – ‘Ritson thrice mingled in controversy with the Editors of Shakspeare; and it is to be lamented, that in these and other publications he treated some respectable contemporaries with very undeserved asperity’ – before offering his own contribution to the ongoing debate. He observes that ‘Ritson’s errors have been severely visited, and for his controversial offences he has been represented as carrying into private life the morose habits of a Cynic and Misanthrope’. While acknowledging his ‘irritable’ temper, ‘highly nervous temperament’ and ‘acute sensibility’, Surtees downplays Ritson’s radicalism through a focus on his private behaviour:

He had adopted peculiar ideas, both as to religious and civil government, and had on various subjects of less importance indulged in modes of thinking which chiefly concerned himself, but in whatever singular habits or speculative opinions he might indulge, his deep and serious feelings were neither morose or unsocial; his attachments were steady and disinterested; the associates of his youth were the friends of his age, and he lost the regard of no honest man whose good opinion he had once acquired. He neglected no natural tie of blood or connexion, and to an only nephew his attention was parental. In society with those in whose characters he had confidence, Ritson was a lively companion, frank and unreserved; and if tenacious of his own peculiar opinion, he was at least most tolerant of those of others, and would permit every one “to dust it away and jingle his bells to his own tune.” At war only (as a man of secluded habits might wage war) with injustice, fraud, or cruelty, he walked quietly along the sequestered path of literary life.

What had been ‘the moral judgement of his understanding’ to Godwin becomes ‘peculiar ideas’ to Surtees, although both call attention to Ritson’s private behaviour, and the difference between the man that friends and acquaintances remembered and the public persona of the misanthropic antiquary. Surtees observes that ‘there is no good portrait of Ritson, only a caricature, a print, and a slight etching...both of which



seem taken from the caricature', and, in a note, attempts to provide a prose description, as 'Neither of these give any correct idea of little neat old man, in his suit of customary black, with his grey hair and pale delicate complexion, tinged with "Time's faint rose." He should have been taken in his evening chair, cheerfully chirruping some old saw or bardish rhyme'. Surtees emphasises Ritson's ill-health in his final years, presenting him as an old man before the age of fifty-one, in a manner designed to elicit pity rather than scandal, 'cheerfully chirruping' rather than ranting. As Godwin had done, he provides an incomplete bibliography. When Surtees' work was reviewed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of December 1823 the memoir of Ritson was extracted and reproduced as a useful record of 'a very distinguished English critic' (523), a much more positive account than had appeared there twenty years before.

When Brewster's *Parochial History* was revised and expanded for the edition of 1829, Ritson himself became one of its subjects, with an entry in the section on 'Local Biography':

The local biography of this work would be incomplete without a due notice of this ingenious native of the place. Indeed the writer is called upon to acknowledge, with every proper regard, the obliging communication which he made of his *Collections*, towards the first edition of this history; having once had it in contemplation to have given some account of his native town, and for that purpose had made considerable research in public libraries and public offices. (370-371)

Brewster defers to Surtees, adding details about Ritson's childhood and early education, presenting him as a very local figure, and one that Stockton could be proud of producing. The understanding of Ritson promoted by Percy, with the assistance of Nares and Cromek, was influential, yet coexisted with more positive accounts.

The link between biography and bibliography was made explicit by Joseph Haslewood, in *Some Account of the Life and Publications of the late Joseph Ritson, Esq.* (1824). While Surtees and Brewster presented Ritson from the perspective of their shared background in local antiquarian research, Haslewood approached him from their shared interest in the study and publication of early English literary texts.

Haslewood was a member of a new generation, a founding member of the Roxburghe Club and the editor of a number of significant medieval texts, who claimed Ritson as a model for responsible scholarship (Wheat 37). Haslewood's publications demonstrate how far the study of early English texts had progressed in the decades since Ritson's death. As will be discussed in the final chapter, when Scott wished to consult the *Book of Saint Albans*, a fifteenth-century treatise on hunting, hawking, and heraldry, he had to rely upon his acquaintances to carry George Ellis's rare copy or a transcript from London to Edinburgh, with several frustrating delays. Haslewood produced a sumptuous edition in 1810, as near a facsimile as possible, with a detailed introduction which was the definitive authority on questions of composition and authorship for some time. Similarly, the lack of a new edition of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was a constant irritation to those who studied medieval romance, and, as documented by Barry Gaines, Scott and Southey, independently and together, struggled unsuccessfully for many years to find a form that would be acceptable to publishers. Haslewood has been identified as the editor of one of the influential popular editions which finally appeared in 1816 (Gaines 11-12). In his *Account*, Haslewood draws attention to the nineteenth-century reception of Ritson's work, to the posthumous productions and new editions which had already appeared or were underway, and to the new editions of those works that he had criticised which now incorporated his corrections. Haslewood himself collected together Ritson's local collections to form *Northern Garlands* (1810), prepared a new edition of *Gammer Gurton's Garland* (1810), and planned a new edition of the *Bibliographia Poetica*, though this was never completed (Bronson 779). In many ways, some of Ritson's works were better received in this period than when they had initially appeared, in part because they had themselves contributed to a growing interest in early English material.

Haslewood begins with the observation that 'as the works of an Author become popular, an inquiry is naturally excited respecting his habits and manners; and hence an interest arises from a consideration of the character before us, to trace the origin of that mode of study, or excitement of research, which enabled him to produce the many amusing and enlightened volumes, that either appeared with his

name, or are attributed to his pen' (1). However, while travellers or statesmen may lead interesting lives, most writers do not, posing a challenge for their biographers:

The common routine of a literary man, occupying for many years Chambers in an Inn of Court, whose egress and regress formed little more than visits to public libraries or book-auctions, without any such auxiliary assistance as is now commonly and often injudiciously resorted to, of social conversations, or private correspondence, can only be expected to lead to a mere minute record of his various publications. The biographical notices of the late Joseph Ritson are of a common character, trite and few. (2)

Like Godwin and Surtees, Haslewood emphasises the quotidian life of Ritson, and the constant presence in the public libraries which enabled his research. After brief remarks on Ritson's background, Haslewood provides an enumerated list of Ritson's publications, loosely joined and annotated to form a narrative. He attempts to insert some drama by portraying Ritson as a scholarly combatant, who 'entered the field fearless of contemporary names, however worn in the toil, and of confirmed fame and notoriety; while, as a critical censor, he erected his banner of doughty defiance, and fearlessly and implicitly expected submissiveness from every fellow-student' (6). While the alliteration adds a heroic edge, Haslewood is primarily concerned with softening Ritson's reputation, consistently attempting to paint Ritson in the best possible light. Most notably, he claims that Ritson had written a letter 'declaring his poignant regret, even to tearfulness, that it had been his misfortune to live an unbeliever', and that he had come to regret his attacks on Warton (3-4, 7). He responds to the existing biographical accounts, praising Godwin's 'well drawn character' and Surtees's 'spirited Memoir' and condemning the 'uncalled for' inclusion of Ritson's final days in Cromeek (35-36). He is able to add the only known image of Ritson other than the caricature, 'a profile cut in paper by the late very ingenious Mrs. Park' which serves as his frontispiece (36). Like his predecessors, Haslewood is concerned with establishing Ritson's character:

His constitutional irritability, and consciousness of his own superiority, made him very austere toward the periodical critics; and when he condescended to reply to their attacks, it was so unguardedly,

and in such a course strain of invective, as could not be expected to produce any suspension of their sharp tone of censure.

Yet, cold, austere, and reserved as were his general manners, those most intimate with him never found his habits unsocial, or his opinions uncandid. The core of the heart was warm, liberal, and sound – the feelings generous, kind, congenial, and beneficent; and when appearing otherwise, it may be attributed to the corroding acrimony of temper, commonly engendered and worked upon by a continual habitude of seclusion, and the painful belief, arising therefrom, of chilling neglect and consequent unimportance, too often the consequence of not mixing actively in society. The man of abstracted habits, who declines the invitations of social friendship, must always expect to find himself accused of an intolerant asperity of disposition, and (however unintentional) a repulsive negligence of the common rules of civility. Even Ritson's wayward attack upon Warton and Percy seems to have created a licence for any vagrant hand to strew a nettle on his grave, however incapable of culling the flowers and admiring the blossoms which he transplanted from their remote obscurity. (37-39)

In his florid reflections, Haslewood uses Ritson to address the question of how research, criticism, and debate should be undertaken, a subject of immediate importance to Haslewood himself as both an editor and a member of the Roxburghe Club. Ritson functions as a warning, not of 'maniacal tendencies', but of the bad habits that excessively solitary scholarship could produce, particularly when combined with periodical invective.

When Ritson had died, Percy, privately and publically, worked to circulate a narrative about his life and death, which has since proved influential. However, another man was working diligently to establish and maintain a different legacy – Joseph Frank, Ritson's nephew. Frank was the son of Ritson's sister Ann and Robert Frank. He was born in 1770, and his father apparently died soon after (Bronson 66). As Surtees noted, Ritson took on a paternal role, supporting his sister and nephew in

Stockton once he had established himself in London. When Scott heard of Ritson's death, he wrote to George Ellis:

Poor Ritson is no more. All his vegetable soups and pudding have not been able to avert the evil day, which, I understand, was preceded by madness. It must be worth while to inquire who has got his MSS., – I mean, his own notes and writings. The "Life of Arthur," for example, must contain many curious facts and quotations, which the poor defunct had the power of assembling to an astonishing degree, without being able to combine anything like a narrative....The ballads he had collected in Cumberland and Northumberland, too, would greatly interest me. If they have fallen into the hands of any liberal collector, I dare say I might be indulged with a sight of them. Pray inquire about this matter. (*Letters of Walter Scott* I: 205)

Ellis replies with the report that Ritson's papers are to be auctioned:

Our friend, Heber ... will not have lost a moment in sending to town all sorts of commissions for the purpose of securing as much as he can of the strange farrago compiled by his deceased friend....For the rest, as the little mans MSS were sure to prove "Cavear to the multitudes", and could offer no hopes of profit to the booksellers, I trust that Heber will find no great difficulty in getting them into his possession. (MS 873 58r-59r).

Many of Ritson's manuscripts were sold with his library in December, and several annotated copies of the sale catalogue survive (one is qtd. in Bronson 788-791). However, Ellis was mistaken. Many of Ritson's manuscripts, particularly those which were nearly complete, such as the 'Life of Arthur', were held back by Frank, who planned to publish them himself. Despite Ellis's assurances, several others went to booksellers who hoped to profit from them, although Heber was able to secure several. Heber purchased Ritson's incomplete dictionary, now in the National Library of Wales, and the 'Catalogue of Romances', now in the British Library. Longman and Rees outbid George Chalmers for the completed 'Bibliographia Scotica', later lending it to Chalmers when he was preparing his edition of Dunbar (Bronson 258). Malone was incensed that booksellers had bought Ritson's notes on

Shakespeare; his annotated catalogue lists ‘Rees’ as the purchaser of the eight volumes of Johnson and Steevens’ edition interleaved with Ritson’s notes and three volumes of Ritson’s notes for £110 (Bronson 789). As late as 1824 Haslewood was convinced that an edition of Shakespeare’s plays bearing Ritson’s name could and should be published from these volumes (43-48). The bookseller William Clarke, who specialized in legal works, purchased everything relating to Ritson’s professional work, some of which he subsequently published (Bronson 789-90).

During his life, Ritson participated in several collaborative antiquarian networks, within which favours, information, books and transcripts were exchanged. After Ritson’s death, Frank ensured that his work continued to circulate within those networks. For example, in 1806 Scott wrote to Surtees, lamenting that ‘Poor Ritson’s MSS. were sadly dispersed’ and describing some of the ballads which Ritson had collected, which he would have like to have seen, particularly ‘Rookhope Ride’ (*Letters* I: 298). Surtees acted as an intermediary between Scott and Frank, assuring Scott that Ritson’s papers were not entirely dispersed:

In a former letter of Mr Franks he mentioned to me his intention of at some time or other giving to the public some act. of his late uncle Ritson whose *executor* he was & whose papers & Ms all that remained at his death are I believe in Franks hands but many were lamentably dispersed & destroyed. He there says “I am making a Collection of Mr Ritsons letters with some little account of his life *which* I mean at one time or other to give to the public – may I beg the favour of your inquiring of Mr Scott whether he or some of his literary friends with whom R. might have corresponded...*would* oblige me with any letters or other Papers useful in such a work” – his subsequent observations, as I intended sending this under a Frank I have given you in his own letter.

Mr Frank who is established as a conveyancer at Stockton is a man of great ingenuity & spend many years under his uncle in order to his education [*sic*] for the branch of law he follows. I dare venture to say that if it is in *your* power to procure him any materials for his

projected illustration of poor Ritsons life... they will be used with scrupulous delicacy. (NLS MS 870 8v)

Surtees encloses Frank's letter, which suggests that in addition to antiquarian research Frank was assisting him with legal matters. He provides Scott with 'Rookhope Ryde' as promised, along with the extensive notes and background material that Ritson had gathered. 'Rookhope Ryde' could then be incorporated into the 1821 edition of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, with the note:

The late eminent antiquary, Mr Joseph Ritson, took down this ballad from the mouth of the reciter, and printed it as part of an intended collection of Border Ballads, which was never published. His nephew, Mr Frank, was so good as to favour me with the copy from which it is here given. To the illustrations of Mr Ritson, I have been enabled to add those of my friend Mr Surtees. (I: 260-261)

Ritson's work had a long and influential afterlife in the nineteenth century, both in manuscript and print. While Percy presented Ritson as fundamentally unsound, this narrative coexisted with a continued respect for the accuracy and breadth of Ritson's research in other circles.

Frank continued to send his uncle's unpublished materials to other antiquaries and to request any surviving letters for several decades. He was eventually able to oversee the publication of several posthumous works and revised editions of some of the earlier collections. The collection of letters was finally published in 1833 accompanied by a 'Memoir' by Harris Nicolas, which drew upon a diary from Ritson's early years which has since been lost. Like the other biographical responses to Ritson, the *Letters* offer a deliberate intervention in the public memory of Ritson, as outlined by Frank in the 'Advertisement':

These volumes contain a collection of the late Mr. Ritson's Letters, from an early part of his life to its close; comprising a period of nearly thirty years. The publication has been long delayed from various causes, but principally a regard to the feelings of some of the parties to whom the letters are addressed – now beyond the reach of praise or blame; – and a disinclination to obtrude on public notice the private and unimportant matters to which a few of them will appear to relate.

The latter class, however, could not be omitted consistently with the editors anxious wish to exhibit the writers character and disposition to the world in a true light, – not misanthropic and unsocial, as too often represented, but singularly benevolent and urbane. To the attainment of this object every other consideration yielded; and the editor has gratefully to acknowledge that the favourable evidence in support of it, afforded by the letters themselves, is most ably enforced in the “Memoir” which precedes them.

The letters achieve this goal admirably. Ritson’s correspondence with his family, particularly his earnest advice to his young nephew and his description of his health in his final years, is often touching. Although the details of his research are often dry, and of little interest in themselves, they demonstrate the collaboration that underpinned Ritson’s work, as he constantly performs favours for his correspondents, providing them with information and transcripts, while asking for similar favours in return. Nicolas’s memoir, like the work of Haslewood and Surtees, demonstrates the importance of Ritson and his contested legacy to the next generation of antiquaries, as it offers Nicolas the opportunity to defend Ritson as a champion of truth. Nicolas was himself no stranger to controversy, as he held the communities in which he participated to a high standard, alienating many of his peers (Lee). Describing his belief that ‘Literary forgeries were in his opinion no less criminal than commercial frauds’, Nicolas admits that ‘his present biographer confesses that his sentiments differ in degree only from those of Ritson’, condemning the ways in which sloppiness or sophistication undermines the entire project of history (xx-xxi). Moreover, Nicolas does not merely challenge the attacks on Ritson by his enemies, but questions Haslewood’s earlier interventions, responding to his claim that Ritson came to regret his attacks on Warton with the conclusion:

This passage, like some others in the work alluded to, is one of those needless attempts to extenuate the conduct of the subject of this memoir, which sprung from an amiable motive, but by which neither he nor the public are benefitted, because they happen to be without foundation. The individual who had the best means of information respecting Ritson – his kinsman and executor – denies the truth of the



statement; and it is no compliment to Ritson's memory to deprecate the censure which any act of his life may excite, at the sacrifice of that principle which was the leading trait of his character. (xxiii)

Nicolas closes his memoir with the exhortation that, thirty years since Ritson's death 'it is certainly time that justice should be rendered to his character', arguing that, after all this time, 'the animosities which his criticisms naturally excited must surely have subsided in the breasts of the few of his survivors whom he aggrieved; and it may be expected that even the most rancorous among them will allow his eminent literary services, his unsullied integrity, and his numerous other virtues, to atone for mere defects of temper and constitutional irritability' (lxxviii).

These works remained the chief sources for information about Ritson for the rest of the nineteenth century, with the addition of a few anecdotes in Lockhart's *Life of Scott* and a second wave of republications of some of his texts at the end of the century. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a revival of interest in the antiquaries and ballad collectors of the late eighteenth century, including Ritson. H.S.V. Jones contributed a spirited defence of Ritson to the *Sewanee Review* in 1914, arguing that antiquarianism 'constituted a natural part of the romantic programme' which was too often overlooked, and painting Ritson as a 'romantic antiquarian' who united 'sense and sensibility' (341, 350). Ritson's enthusiasm and emotional investment in his material is reinterpreted again, within a different framework. In 1916, Emilie Thomas Arnton submitted 'Joseph Ritson and the Ballad' as a Master's Thesis to the University of California, arguing that 'Joseph Ritson had a well-defined place in the history of ballad investigation and that his influence has ever since been an important factor in the study of ancient literature' ('Preface'). In the same year, Henry A. Burd published his doctoral dissertation, *Joseph Ritson: A Critical Biography*. Like earlier works, Burd offers a correction: Joseph Ritson had been neglected, but 'This neglect was not altogether unnatural. Ritson's method of criticism was so invidiously personal and his beliefs and habits were so eccentric that attention was attracted primarily to his peculiarities, while his stable qualities were overlooked by the majority' ('Preface'). Burd dismisses Haslewood as 'nothing more than a catalogue of the publications' and Nicolas as 'a personal account based on Ritson's letters and the reminiscences of his nephew'

(‘Preface’). Like Jones, Burd places Ritson within the context of the emerging study of romanticism, arguing that ‘although a potent factor in reviving the interest in ballads and old poetry and in hastening the acceptance of advanced standards of editorship and criticism, he has been largely ignored in the historical appraisal of the romantic movement’ (‘Preface’).

On 21 January 1922, W.P. Ker made Ritson the subject of his Presidential Address to the Modern Humanities Research Association, arguing once again that ‘Joseph Ritson, on the whole, has had less than justice’, and offering Ritson as a representative of an earlier age of scholarly exploration, unfettered by the institutional constraints of the University (3). Unkindly, he uses Burd as an example of the ‘half-baked research’ encouraged by the ‘variety of narrow learning’ ‘limited to the Degree and the Dissertation’ (2-3).<sup>5</sup> Ker constructs a history for himself as well as Ritson, as he reflects on his selection as president:

I have been chosen one of the captains of a band of adventurers,  
whose province is the ocean of stories, the fortunate isles of romance,  
kingdoms of wonders beyond the farthest point of the voyage of Argo.  
The business of your president is like that of Francis Drake taking his  
men to the treasure-house of the world....where our treasure is, there  
is no grudging, no chance of quarrels about sharing: each man’s gain  
is the profit of all, and the riches multiply under the eyes of the  
adventurers, instead of being tucked away in hiding places on the  
“Dead Man’s Chest.” (1)

Ritson worked in a period when the study of early English literature, and vernacular literature more widely, had no place within educational institutions (David Matthews outlines many of the consequences of this for Ritson and others). As the study of medieval English came under the scope of the University, Ker turned to Ritson to establish a history of his own discipline, claiming him as a model, arguing that ‘Ritson belonged to the great age of the adventurers, the *conquistadores*, Percy, Warton, Tyrwhitt, Scott, Ellis, Leyden, not to speak of their great contemporaries on

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<sup>5</sup> A few years earlier, Ker provided a scathing review of Burd’s biography for the *Modern Language Review*.

the continent – the brothers Grimm, Ferdinand Wolf, Raynouard’ (3). Ker had written some of the most influential works on medieval literature at the time, including *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (1897), *The Dark Ages* (1904), and *English Literature: Medieval* (1912). The MHRA had been founded shortly before, and the previous presidential lectures had tended towards the self-reflective. The year before, in ‘Our Title & Its Import’ (1920), Otto Jespersen reflected on the nature and purpose of an international organization devoted to the study of modern languages in the aftermath of the World War. Ker made several similar lectures, claiming specific men as forefathers as a method of navigating a changing disciplinary and institutional landscape. In 1910, he gave the inaugural ‘Warton Lecture on English Poetry’ to the British Academy:

Thomas Warton represents the history of English poetry, and, more particularly, of English poetry in the Middle Ages...His name is rightly chosen to inaugurate those studies in this Academy, to give an example, from the eighteenth century, of some things which can hardly be bettered at the present day. However much may be erroneous and how much defective in his published work, there is in it, throughout, an example of historical studies springing from a fresh and genuine love of the pursuit.

It may be confessed at once without disguise or palliation that Thomas Warton did not come up to the requirements of a modern University...I wonder whether the Academy remembered this when they determined to set up his name and image in their hall as an ancestor to be respected. (1)

In 1915, he gave the presidential address to the annual meeting of the Philological Society on Jacob Grimm, ‘the greatest of our ancestors’, beginning with a reflection on the other scholars that he could claim as disciplinary ancestors: Henry Sweet, Walter William Skeat, and Frederick James Furnivall (3-4). Ker understood his own work, and the disciplines and institutions within which he worked, through the past.

The authoritative biography of Ritson remains Bertrand H. Bronson’s *Joseph Ritson: Scholar-at-Arms* (1938). Bronson begins by placing his own work in the context of the earlier biographical works. He offers a detailed critique of Burd, with

the justification that ‘Since the present work will inevitably be measured against Burd’s it will not be amiss if I set down in some detail, and with as little prejudice as I can, my own estimate of his accomplishment’ (ix). Bronson is largely positive, but offers two qualifications. First, he objects to the chronological structure as ‘an ineffective way of attacking Ritson’s work’, and explains his own approach, in which he offers first a conventional biography, followed by individual chapters on his attacks on Warton, his engagement with Shakespearean scholarship, his attacks on Percy, and his legal career (ix). Second, Bronson argues that Burd ‘has worked with an eye so single to Ritson that his subject has suffered by this devotion’ resulting in a ‘laboratory analysis, exhibiting him in a vacuum’ while Bronson himself attempts to exhibit ‘a man and his accomplishment against the background of a society and an age’ (x). Bronson makes no appeal for justice for Ritson:

There is here no question of reversing the judgment of posterity by a brilliantly revolutionary appeal. The minds of students – who alone, probably, are interested in so minor a figure – have already arrived at a verdict which is as true as such decisions can be expected to be; and small adjustments, a fairer emphasis, a clearer definition, are all one can hope to achieve. The biographer of Ritson cannot flatter himself that a new study of the antiquary is awaited with breathless eagerness. More about him, doubtless, than an oppressed world cares to remember is already in print. (xi)

This is very encouraging. However, I would argue that the time has come to return once more to Ritson. Despite his claims, Bronson’s focus remains narrowly on Ritson, and he remains confined by the existing approaches, concerned with evaluating Ritson’s behaviour and determining how to interpret the role of mental illness in his life and death. While Bronson brings a different sensibility to these questions than his nineteenth-century predecessors, he brings his own assumptions to bear. When he establishes, using the parish registers, that Ritson had only one sister (Ann, the mother of Joseph Frank) and that she was born only a month after their parents’ wedding, this provides the key to understanding Ritson’s troubles:

Both Ann and her brother showed a lack of balance in later life, a nervous excitability which seems, in the last illnesses of both, to have

risen to the point of mental derangement. Such an inheritance is much more likely to have come to them from a flighty mother than from their father's side of the house. That Jane Gibson was flighty is, it is true, only an inference; but it may be allowed to stand for what it is worth. She was easily won by her husband; she produced unhealthy children. (11)

Bad mothers explain everything.

A great deal of valuable work has been done more recently on Ritson, drawing on the earlier biographical accounts. This has generally been fragmentary – specific aspects of Ritson's work are addressed within the history of specific fields. His work on songs and ballads is studied within the field of ballad studies, often mentioned in passing and receiving detailed study in the work of Maureen McLane, Janet Sorensen and others. The *Robin Hood* collection has been thoroughly studied by those scholars interested in the development of the legend and the history of the study of the legend, including Jeffrey Singman and J.C. Holt, and most extensively by Stephen Knight. Even the vegetarian manifesto has found its place, in the work of Timothy Morton. Marilyn Butler approaches Ritson in the context of politically subversive northern antiquaries, although she incorrectly places him in Newcastle. Despite his aspirations, Ritson has received little attention from the scholars of eighteenth-century Shakespearean editorship, although the work of Marcus Walsh, Jack Lynch, Arthur Sherbo, and Simon Jarvis can be applied productively to Ritson's work. Similarly, Rosemary Sweet's work on eighteenth century antiquaries provides illuminating context for Ritson practice.

Ritson published the first collection of medieval romance, *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*, making a selection of complete texts available for the first time. Although this work, and other works on medieval romance published at the time, met a discouraging reception, the recovery of medieval romance proved influential in the subsequent centuries. Consequently, this work has received some of the most detailed recent scholarly attention, as an early contribution to the development of the study of medieval romance and the discipline of Middle English. Arthur Johnston's *Enchanted Ground: The Study of Medieval Romance in the Eighteenth Century* (1964) outlines the theoretical debates on the origin and nature of

romance in the eighteenth century, before offering concise evaluations of the work and portraits of the temperaments of Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, Joseph Ritson, George Ellis, and Walter Scott. His chapter on Ritson provides an incisive, narrowly focused account of Ritson's work on romance, compiled from quotations from Ritson's works, contemporary reviews and correspondence, and Bronson's biography. Notably, at this time Ritson's collection was still in use, described by Johnston as 'particularly useful as a compendious collection of texts for a reader without access to more recent editions of the separate romances' (139), and so Johnston's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Ritson's work offered both a historical account of contested scholarly practice and practical advice for contemporary scholars. Monica Santini's *Impetus of Amateur Scholarship: Discussing and Editing Medieval Romances in Late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010) provides a descriptive account of the publications of and about medieval romance in Britain, placing Ritson's publications within an emerging field of study.

David Matthews' *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910* (1999), provides the most incisive account of Ritson and the early history of the study and publication of Middle English texts to date. Matthews argues convincingly for the importance of the study of the 'formative phase of Middle English', demonstrating that an account of the development of the discipline will address 'the most pressing debates' of the present, including:

the nature of editing and the politics of editing; the perceived marginalization of Middle English studies; the relation of Middle English studies to the wider, nonacademic world; and, finally, the implications of such genealogical exercises as this one for current practices of teaching and criticism. (xi)

While Matthews acknowledges that the majority of nineteenth-century commentary would be of little use to readers today, he argues that 'our own historical situatedness is as important as respect for the historical character of our object of study. In turn, our situatedness is produced by a lineage or genealogy of scholarship for which we should also have respect, instead of, as we tend to do, instantly forgetting it, indeed actually effacing it, by omission' (xvii). To explore this lineage, Matthews studies

both ‘the materiality of the books produced in the period and the impact of the lives and approaches of the scholars who produced them’ (xvii). He argues that ‘a recentering of early *editions* in the field of analysis is due,’ particularly for this period, for ‘in the almost complete absence of work on Middle English in the universities before the 1870s, Middle English studies, such as it was, was conducted in editions of texts’ (xxi). A study of the history of Middle English scholarship in this period is thus in practice a study of the editing and publication of Middle English texts.

As Matthews demonstrates, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, discussion and editing of ‘Middle English’ was necessarily an amateur antiquarian project, undertaken outside of the universities and ‘other state-sanctioned ways of organizing disciplines’, part of ‘the public sphere, and unlike the study of either postmedieval or Anglo-Saxon literature’ theoretically ‘appropriable from all kinds of politically diverse positions’ (8). However, in practice, this apparent freedom came with its own limitations, as most antiquarians had to market their texts to a wider public:

As the general public would not buy the raw data of ancient literature and culture, scholars had to make their material appealing, the resultant dilemma was a recurrent one for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians: the problem of the reconciliation of the man of taste with the rigorous antiquarian scholar. The very otherness of the ancient text made it worth recovering was that which made it unacceptable to a broad public. But the more the scholar polished the material to make it acceptable to modernity, the less authentically antique it became. (8)

Matthews links the major debates over the proper editing of Middle English to the material context of publication, arguing that despite the ‘apparently utopian possibilities’ of an amateur, public and uninstitutionalized discipline, ‘in practice...the kinds of scholars who came to Middle English usually lacked economic capital and sought to accrue it through a prior accumulation of symbolic capital’ (9). Without institutional support, early scholars without private fortunes had to either appeal to a popular market or use their works to seek patronage.

In his account of the possibilities and limitations of this period, Matthews presents Thomas Percy as a scholar who successfully navigated these tensions, using the publication of the *Reliques* to seek patronage and advance his career. Ritson is presented as Percy's foil. Although Ritson's accuracy made him 'the most important, the defining figure, for Middle English in the last fifteen years of the eighteenth century', Matthews argues that his 'spectacular failure as a scholar can be directly linked to precisely his failure to fashion the self via the literature he studied,' (51, xxiv). Matthews attributes 'Ritson's near-total failure to make a favourable impact on scholarship in his lifetime' not merely to his inability to reach a popular audience, nor to his political or religious opinions, as these had little impact on his published work (51). Rather, 'it was the man, the self, of Joseph Ritson that his contemporaries rejected, and as long as that self was sufficiently notorious to have existence beyond the works, the works were treated as an extension of that self and accordingly rejected' (51). Matthews argues that while Ritson offered 'considerable projections of self in his most argumentative material' he did not attempt to construct an identity in the manner of Percy or Scott: 'Ritson did not seek patronage, never dedicated his works, and did not place his name on any of his texts other than *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*' and his rejection of 'the improving editorial self' contributed to 'this self-effacement from his texts' (51-52). Although Ritson 'found no mechanism to make his scholarship acceptable or desirable' his enemies used the absence of an identity created by himself to create one for him, as Percy controlled the narrative of his death (52).

In his treatment of Ritson, Matthews demonstrates that this complex and often marginalized figure can be studied to provide a better sense of the development of the study of Middle English. Matthews' approach provides a useful and illuminating study of Ritson, particularly his insistence on treating Ritson as a product of his own time, who engaged with and reacted to the challenges before him, rather than an editor 'too far ahead of his time to be appreciated by it' as he is sometimes evaluated (29). Matthews' discussion can be extended in several useful ways. Given the scope of Matthew's work, the analysis of Ritson's publications inevitably merely scratches the surface. In this thesis, I would like to reintegrate these valuable recent works into a study of how Ritson undertook his research and



publications. Some features of his work that are puzzling when considered individually are less obscure when considered in the light of his immediate context. Others which appear straightforward become more complex. Although I would like to move away from the biographical approach which has dominated the study of Ritson, there is still a great deal to be gained by approaching his works sequentially, to understand how Ritson's work and its reception changed over time, and which resources were available to him. As Bronson argues, Ritson did not exist in a vacuum. The work he undertook was made possible by the social practices of antiquarian collaboration, the possibilities for self-promotion in periodical culture, the publishing opportunities available at the time, and the availability of material in the British Museum and University libraries, among many other factors. Ritson was a product of his time, and a habitual contrarian, and so provides a fascinating insight into the study of early English literature at the end of the eighteenth century. In the following chapters, I argue that a narrow, even diagnostic focus on Ritson personally has obscured the role of controversy and collaboration in the work of Ritson and late eighteenth-century culture more generally.



## Chapter 1: Observations and Remarks

### ‘A battel is fought between foot and great Hobby-Horses’

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1782, Thomas Warton wrote to George Steevens, reporting that:

I find I am attacked in a heavy close-printed Pamphlet, of so small a price as Half a Crown. If you know, or can discover the author, I should be greatly obliged to you if you would give me early intelligence. I see it does not come from the Rowley quarter. The author appears to be a student of the British Museum.

(*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 460)

The ‘close-printed Pamphlet’ was *Observations on the Three First Volumes of the History of English Poetry, In a Familiar Letter to the Editor*, a biting attack on Thomas Warton’s *History*, the third volume of which had been recently published. The *Observations* take the form of an unsigned ‘familiar letter’ addressed directly to Warton, in which the author observes that the *History of English Poetry* ‘stands high in the public estimation’ owing to the general high opinion of Warton’s ‘veracity and care as a historian’ (1). However, the author declares that he is ‘somewhat too restless in my enquiries, too desirous of being able to judge for myself, to be satisfied either with a writers reputation or with the opinion of the world’ (1). He must therefore evaluate the work for himself, and presents ‘the result of my enquiries: the public disclosure of which will not, I flatter myself, either to you, or your numerous readers, prove an unacceptable service’ (1). This ostensibly helpful tone continues for nearly fifty pages, as the author proceeds through the *History*, identifying mistakes, challenging assertions, and demanding evidence. In a cruel flourish the *Observations* are printed in the same size and format as Warton’s *History*, so that, as the inside cover promises, they can be ‘bound up with that celebrated work, to which they will be found a very useful appendix’. Copies survive in this form, at least some readers acquiescing to the demand that Warton’s work be reconsidered in light of these criticisms, perpetually burdened with an inflamed

appendix never sanctioned by the author.<sup>6</sup> The incorporation of the *Observations* into the *History of English Poetry* was made more permanent in the nineteenth century, when the updated editions edited by Thomas Price (1824) and William Carew Hazlitt (1871) were obliged to take the *Observations* into account. Despite the assurance that Warton is only evaluated ‘as author of the work in question’, the *Observations* are a deeply personal attack, often implying, and sometimes simply stating, that the identified errors result from Warton’s ignorance, incompetence, or deliberate deception (1). There are no simple mistakes or disagreements: Warton is either an idiot or a liar.

This extravagantly abusive pamphlet quickly provoked a reaction, not least because Warton was sent a copy ‘with Compliments from the Author’ (*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 467). As Bronson records, ‘a sort of guerrilla warfare’ ensued in the *St. James’s Chronicle* and other periodicals during the six months following the publication of the pamphlet, drawing in defenders of Warton, attacks on the author of the *Observations*, and qualified support for the *Observations* (often from those who had other axes to grind with Warton) (Bronson 334-335). Reviews appeared in the *British Magazine and Review*, the *Critical Review*, the *European Magazine and London Review*, and the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, generally attacking and dismissing the *Observations* while acknowledging that they displayed a great deal of learning, perversely applied.

The author was quickly identified. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, Steevens replied to Warton’s enquiry with a letter identifying his ‘assailant’:

The author of the Pamphlet you mention, is a Mr. Ritson, of whom I know little more than the name. He was, I believe, bred to the law, lives in Grays Inn, & is, I think, one of Mr Masterman the Conveyancer’s clerks. For further particulars of him I must refer you

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the copy of Warton’s *History* held by the National Library of Scotland was acquired at the time of its publication through legal deposit. Ritson’s *Observations* are now bound with the third volume of this copy, shelfmark Jac.I.1.10. I have not been able to determine when it was acquired nor when the decision was made to treat it as an appendix. In addition, several manuscript notes in this copy of the *Observations* direct readers to the ensuing controversy in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, providing a material manifestation of the intertextual reading practices produced by literary controversy. I would like to thank Dr Graham Hogg for his assistance with my enquiries.

to Mr Reed of Staple Inn. I have often found your assailant at the Museum, once beg'd permission for him to see the late Mr Croft's Library, & further this deponent sayeth not, having never had any acquaintance with him, or even spoken to him three times in my life.

(*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 461)

Thomas Percy, whose accuracy and honesty as the editor of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* had provided a secondary target for the *Observations*, applied to his own contacts, and received a response from Michael Lort, on whom he relied for news from London. In a letter dated 15 January, 1783, Lort sent Percy a digest of the literary, political, and ecclesiastic gossip, warning him that an attack was forthcoming:

Mr. Ritson, a young lawyer of Gray's Inn, is the author of the attack on Warton; he has been digging hard in the Museum mines for some time past, and is quite a Drawcansir, for I am told he has a pamphlet ready to be published against Steevens and Malone's Shakspeare, and also a Collection of Old Ballads, in which I presume a former Editor is to be handled as roughly. (Nichols *Illustrations* VII: 443)

This is Ritson as he appeared at the beginning of 1783, when Warton and Percy reached out to their networks for information: bred to the law, a conveyancer's clerk, obviously a student of the Museum, and planning further works.

The reference to Drawcansir is taken from Villiers' satirical attack on Dryden, *The Rehearsal*, in which the foolish hero is introduced as 'a fierce *Hero*, that frights his Mistriss, snubs up Kings, baffles Armies, and does what he will, without regard to good manners, justice or numbers' (IV.i.92). As the ridiculous machinations of the plot reach their climax, Drawcansir appears suddenly, slaughters everyone, and leaves:

*A battel is fought between foot and great Hobby-Horses. At last Drawcansir comes in, and kills 'em all on both sides. All this while the Battel is fighting, Bayes is telling them when to shout, and shouts with 'em.*

*Draw.* Others may boast a single man to kill;  
But I, the bloud of thousands, daily spill.

Let petty Kings the names of Parties know:  
 Where e'er I come, I slay both friend and foe.  
 The swiftest Horsmen my swift rage controls,  
 And from their Bodies drives their trembling souls.  
 (V.i.288-293)

Ritson might attack 'without regard to good manners', but he did not attack indiscriminately. As Lort had warned Percy, the *Observations* were the first barrage in a tripartite attack on some of the most respected works on early English literature. The next phase followed soon after. Steevens kept Warton abreast of unfolding developments, in a letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> November:

Solamen miseris socios habuisse [It is a comfort to have partners in our distress] –. The Author of the Epistle to you, has already begun to print a similar Address to the Editors of Shakspeare. He means to publish an Edition of him, if any Booksellers, not of our faction, will employ him. I send you this intelligence almost as soon as I have received it. (*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 466)

This address took the form of *Remarks, Critical and Illustrative on the Text and Notes of the Last Edition of Shakspeare*, nearly two hundred and fifty octavo pages of objections to Johnson and Steevens' edition of 1778, preceded by a brief but significant preface and followed by the announcement of Ritson's plans to publish his own edition. The *Remarks* were the first in a series of three similar pamphlets, being followed by the *Quip Modest* (1788), a response to the edition revised by Reed, and *Cursory Criticisms on the Edition of Shakspeare Published by Edmond Malone* (1792). Although the proposed edition never came to pass, Shakespearean editing and scholarship provided the background for Ritson's work and the publication of early English material more broadly. Ritson's *Select Collection of English Songs* (1783), when it appeared, was an elegant work for a general audience, yet as Lort had warned, Percy was indeed handled roughly in the introductory preface and essay.

Taken together, the *Observations*, the *Remarks*, and the references to Percy in the *English Songs* constitute a deliberate attack on the major works in the most prestigious fields of the emerging study of early English literature. However, the late

eighteenth century had no shortage of battles between foot and hobby-horses. The first portion of this chapter will examine the role of adversarial controversy in literary scholarship at the time. Ritson's polemics were neither anomalous nor unprecedented, particularly as they appeared at the height of the Rowley controversy, when Warton was already under a sustained attack. Rather than a character flaw or the symptom of an unhinged mind, controversy was as much a part of eighteenth-century literary culture as civility and collaboration. Ritson's early works engage with an existing genre of polemic and self-promotion through controversy and notoriety, and were initially received within that context. The second and third sections will examine the ways in which Ritson presented himself in the *Observations* and the *Remarks* respectively. In addition to abuse, they both offer a sophisticated engagement with the epistemology and practice of literary research. While Ritson attacks Warton, Percy, Steevens, Johnson and Malone for their failure to adhere to their stated standards, he establishes his own qualifications.

### **'The Science of Blackguardism'**

Bronson portrays Ritson's publication of the *Observations* as a potentially fatal misstep:

With a growing company of literary friends who recognized his merits, Ritson could look forward to a bright and happy future. But he now chose deliberately to jeopardize everything by a step which is, after all allowances have been made, inexcusable. This was the publication of his notorious "*Observations* on the three first volumes of the History of English Poetry." Ritson could hardly have selected a scholar against whom wanton insult would be more popularly resented than the genial Thomas Warton. For, besides being the respected spokesman and guide of those who had the taste for the "flower-strewn ways of hoar antiquity," Warton possessed a personal attractiveness which made its appeal generally felt. (72)

Matthews, comparing the ways in which Percy and Ritson used their writing as a vehicle for self-fashioning, echoes this interpretation, claiming that 'The [*Observations*]' would alone have been sufficient for Ritson to have been branded as

the wild man of late-eighteenth-century letters. There was little public respect to be gained by taking “the genial Thomas Warton” to the pillory, a man who had few enemies and many supporters. The *Observations* is a work of astonishing insolence, even by the standards of the time, and Ritson’s kindest supporters have found it difficult to excuse’ (36).

In their focus on Ritson as an individual, this approach neglects the larger culture, which was one of controversy and competition as well as collaboration. The identification of Thomas Warton as someone who ought not to be attacked was not a given, but the object of debate. The *Observations* were an extreme example of a recognizable form of polemic, and appeared at a moment when Warton had come under a sustained attack in the context of the Rowley controversy, when he had taken a firm stand against the authenticity of the poems supposedly written by the fifteenth-century monk. A contributor to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of November 1782 uses the review of Ritson’s *Observations* to condemn it as representative of a larger problem:

One would have hoped the Rowley Controversy had exhausted the science of blackguardism – if indeed it is exhaustible, or respectable names are secure from Envy, or being branded as Scoundrels, Blockheads, Cheats (p. 32), and Liars (p.42). – Thus is this age, which piques itself on free enquiry, and a love of truth and liberty, too justly liable to the reproach of a contrary conduct. Thus, in politics, Priestly attacks Blackstone; Baron or Hollis, and Mac Nicol, Johnson; in history, Stewart, Robertson; in poetry, Steevens and Malone, Milles.

Or write like men of honour and humanity, Critics! – or write no more! (533, references original).

Attacks such as Ritson’s *Observations*, enumerating the flaws of a work and, by extension, of the author’s character, were hardly unusual, although by their nature they tend to be ephemeral and of little interest to those not deeply involved in the relevant controversies. Few major works or writers could escape the publication of pamphlets enumerating objections, and they often began with a declaration of the necessity of publically challenging error, especially the error of the famous and respected. In addition to collaboration and civility, eighteenth-century culture



included partisan feuds and long held grudges. One letter writer, apparently confusing Thomas Warton with his brother Joseph, used the controversy over the *Observations* to express his anger that he was unable to purchase the second volume of his *Essay on Pope* without repurchasing the first (Bronson 334-335). The *Gentleman's Magazine* laments that 'respectable names' are not respected, begging the question that was often the point of contention – who is worthy of respect, and on what grounds. The rhetoric involved, 'free enquiry', 'a love of truth and liberty', could have political implications, as could the attempts to define who should be exempt from public criticism. To understand Ritson's *Observations* as primarily as a manifestation of Ritson's moral or mental failings is to fail to recognize both the history and the immediate context in which his works were situated.

In his polemic works, Ritson claims a place for himself within debates that had begun earlier in the century. Ritson's attack on the editors of Shakespeare is explicitly situated within a tradition of debate, controversy, polemic, satire, and slander between rival Shakespeareans. The epigraph, taken from the *Dunciad*, gestures at a long history of division and mockery. As Ritson observes in the preface, each successive editor had claimed to offer the final word, and yet each new edition reveals that there is more to be done:

A reader of hesitation and reflection will hear this with perfect calmness; he will be no stranger to the fluctuating state of former editions; he will have noticed the boldness and assurance, the legislative and dictatorial manner in which every succeeding editor has ushered himself [*sic*] into the world; and will not easily forget the confidence of each in assuring the public that nothing further could possibly be done to his author: – Is not this the language of Rowe, and Pope, and Theobald, and Warburton, and Hanmer, and Capell? And where are they now? Where even dr. Johnson and mr. Steevens may, in the course of a few revolving years, be sent to accompany them: – the regions of oblivion and disgrace. (ii)

To offer a new edition is inevitably to offer a rebuke to previous editors, and that rebuke rarely remained implicit. Ritson invokes the history of Shakespearean controversy to claim a space for himself, to usher himself into the world.

Shakespearean controversy was more prominent, and has been better studied, than the more obscure polemics of other literary debates. Jack Lynch attributes some of the venom of Shakespearean criticism to the prestige of Shakespeare himself:

As the seventeenth century turned to the eighteenth attacks on Shakespeare became off-limits to British critics – he was above the fault-finding of mere mortals. Rather than ridiculing Shakespeare, then, eighteenth-century critics took to ridiculing one another for serving him badly. Virtually every critic presented himself as Shakespeare’s champion, defending him from a host of incompetent and malicious meddlers. (45)

The eighteenth century was littered with works not unlike the *Remarks*. As Lynch establishes, Theobald’s *Shakespeare Restored: or, Specimen of Errors* (1726), which formed the background for the *Dunciad*, ‘was only one of many eighteenth-century critical quarrels over who was the most capable reader of Shakespeare’, including Thomas Edwards’ *A Supplement to Mr. Warburton’s Edition of Shakespeare: Being the Canons of Criticism* (1748), which anticipated Ritson’s suggestion that his *Observations* be bound as an appendix to Warton; William Kenrick’s *A Review of Doctor Johnson’s New Edition of Shakespeare* (1765); and Edward Capell’s *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare*, which accused Steevens of plagiarism (Lynch 45). Ritson certainly presents himself as Shakespeare’s champion in the preface to the *Remarks*, obliged by ‘the cause of Shakspeare and truth’ to publicly correct error (iii). Shakespeare is ‘*the God of the writers idolatry*, and should any one of these remarks be thought pertinent or useful in the opinion of a single individual who, like him, admires the effusions of this darling child of nature and fancy...it will be sufficient gratification to him for the pains bestowed in drawing them up’ (vi).

Simon Jarvis outlines a history of contention and rivalry in *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearian Textual Criticism and Representations of Scholarly Labour, 1725-1765*. Ritson, falling outside Jarvis’s period, receives only passing mention, but fits into a recognizable pattern. Jarvis draws suggestive parallels between Ritson’s attack on Malone in *Cursory Criticisms* and the debates at the beginning of the century between Pope and Theobald: ‘In each case a powerful and respectable literary luminary is attacked by a low and obscure pamphleteer, and in

each case this difference in social status features explicitly in the controversy' (183). As Jarvis demonstrates, Shakespearean controversy engaged not only with the practice of textual criticism, but the nature of scholarship as a social and increasingly professional activity, in which 'apparently purely epistemological and philological issues are perennially entangled in, although not reducible to, representations and self-representations of the disputants' labour' (2). Theobald's attack on Pope had two results: he was forever immortalized as the chief of the Dunces, and he successfully demonstrated his qualifications as an editor of Shakespeare, leading directly to the opportunity to produce his own edition. Notoriety was not necessarily a poor strategy for advancement.

In the opening pages of his *Remarks*, Ritson draws attention to the role that rank and faction plays in literary controversy, offering a justification for his lack of deference:

The freedom with which every editor has treated his predecessors precludes the necessity of an apology for the liberties taken in the ensuing pages, with the sentiments of some of our most eminent literary characters. The superiority of our commentators rank, however, does not intitle [*sic*] his blunders to respect. It were to be wished that dr. Johnson had shewn somewhat less partiality to *pride of place*; for, though he professes to have treated his predecessors with candour, Theobald, the best of Shakspeares editors, experiences as much scurrility and injustice at his hands, as Hanmer and Warburton, the worst of them, do deference and respect. For this, however, the learned critic might have his private reasons, which, as they could scarcely do him justice, he did right to conceal. (vi-vii, emphasis original)

Ritson's *Remarks* are not unalloyed invective. In some instances, he attempts to negotiate the complexities of criticism with a degree of nuance, disagreeing with men whom he respects:

To controvert the opinions, or disprove the assertions of mr. Steevens, dr. Farmer and mr. Tyrwhitt, men no less remarkable for their learning and genius than for their obliging dispositions and amiable

manners, has been a painful and odious task. But wherever [*sic*] the writer has been under the necessity of differing from any of these gentlemen either in point of opinion or in point of fact, he will not be found to have expressed himself [*sic*] in a manner inconsistent with a due sense of obligations and the profoundest respect. (vii-viii)

In these passages, and in the *Remarks* which enact the outlined policy, Ritson negotiates a complex position. Some men deserve respect and deference, but not along the lines followed by Johnson. Ritson's treatment of Farmer and Tyrwhitt is noticeably more restrained than his *Observations* on Warton, and his objections to specific readings are often couched in praise. Ritson's attempts to temper his criticism were not entirely successful, and Steevens reported to Warton that 'Tyrwhitt is in a high wrath about what is said of him in a part of a note to page 48' (*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 466).<sup>7</sup> Notably, Ritson invokes not only 'learning and genius', but the social features of scholarship, the 'obliging dispositions and amiable manners'. An attack on Johnson or Malone, like the attack on Warton, was an attack on a respected and established figure of a previous generation. To criticize Steevens, Reed, or Farmer was a more fraught undertaking. All had recently done favours for Ritson, and all would, eventually, do favours for him again.

Ritson's use of controversy was not exceptional. At the same time, the focus on Ritson's role as, in Matthews words, 'the wild man of late-eighteenth-century letters' has tended to mask the degree to which Ritson successfully maintained collaborative friendships. The relationship between Ritson and Steevens demonstrates the complexity produced by the coexistence of competition and collaboration. As Steevens' letters to Warton suggest, Ritson's attacks on Warton placed him in an awkward position. Although he downplayed any connection to Ritson, he was obliged to admit that he had seen him in the Reading Room of the Museum, and had done him a significant favour by helping him gain access to Thomas Croft's library. His discomfort intensified when Steevens himself came

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<sup>7</sup> There is no reference to Tyrwhitt of page 48 of the *Remarks*, though there are several passages that could have offended Tyrwhitt.

under attack in the *Remarks*. Steevens, who bore the main responsibility for the edition of 1778, felt the brunt of Ritson's attack, and, as Bronson establishes, took on the task of replying to it under various pseudonyms (379). Steevens felt the attack personally, and may have contributed to the *St James's Chronicle* of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1783, the satirical poem, 'The Pythagorean Critic':

By wise Pythagoras taught, young Ritson's meals  
 With bloody viands never are defil'd;  
 For quadruped, for bird, for fish he feels,  
 His board ne'er smoaks with roast meat, or with boil'd.  
 In this one instance pious, mild, and tame,  
 He's surely in another a great sinner,  
 For man, cries Ritson, man's alone my game!  
 On him I make a most delicious dinner!  
 To venison and to partridge I've no *gout*;  
 For Warton Tom such dainties I resign:  
 Give me plump Steevens, and large Johnson too,  
 And take your turkey and your savoury chine.  
 (qtd. in *Letters* lxxvii. Nichols makes the attribution)

The poem is a reference to Ritson's vegetarianism, and a clear indication of the deeply personal nature of the debate, drawing on knowledge of Ritson's behaviour and beliefs external to his writing. The juxtaposition of an exaggerated concern for the welfare of animals and a sarcastic ferocity towards his fellow men was a frequent source of humour at Ritson's expense, most notably in the vicious caricature produced shortly before his death.<sup>8</sup> Anonymous letters began to appear in the *Chronicle*, attributed to Steevens and Ritson respectively, the first dismissing the *Remarks* as pedantic trash, the latter challenging the qualifications of those who dismissed the *Remarks*. Arthur Sherbo has suggested that Ritson's attacks may have played a role in Steevens' reluctance to offer his own edition of Shakespeare, and

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<sup>8</sup> This humorous juxtaposition was used more gently by Holcroft in his novel *Alwyn* (1780), and Bronson follows William Hazlitt in the suggestion that Holcroft's Handford might have been a satire on his friend Ritson, although if so it was very indirect (32).

that the gradually warming relationship between them in the aftermath of the *Remarks*, notably Ritson's praise of Steevens in the *Quip Modest* (1788), might have encouraged him to return to Shakespearean editing in 1790 (24, 30). By the 1790s, Ritson and Steevens were again on friendly terms, exchanging letters, favours, and gifts (Bronson 180-182). In those circumstances, Ritson could offer remarks and suggestions privately, and Steevens' edition of 1793 incorporates corrections from the *Remarks* and new contributions from Ritson, even in some cases joining forces with Ritson against Malone (for examples see Bronson 527, 533). The advertisement to one of Ritson's final publications, the *Bibliographia Poetica* (1802), begins by attributing the inspiration for the work to a conversation with the recently deceased Steevens, 'of whose familiar acquaintance the editour is proud to boast; and whose rich and wel-selected library, supply'd the title of many a rare and curious volume' (i). Ritson's early publications resulted in several intense feuds, which in some cases continued after his death. The complexity of his relationship with Steevens offers a more nuanced understanding of the tensions within the social practice of literary research, in which the collaborative ideal of a 'republic of letters' co-existed with a tradition of competition and controversy. The competitive and collaborative aspects of scholarly practice could be brought into conflict. This was not merely the dilemma of Ritson as individual, but a feature of how scholarship was practiced at the time. Throughout his short career, Ritson was relatively adept at navigating these tensions, with some notable exceptions.

Warton himself had once been a young scholar attempting to promote himself at the expense of established and respected writers. As David Fairer demonstrates in 'Historical Criticism and the English Canon: A Spenserian Dispute in the 1750s', when Warton was first planning his work on the *Faerie Queene* he found himself in conflict with John Upton, Spenser's most recent editor, and 'an established scholar of great knowledge and experience who had bitter antipathy to refinement and politeness, dismissed the fanciful, effeminate modern reader, rejected the subjective or relative, strictly policed the canon, scorned the barbarous British literary tradition, and had contempt for anything tainted with Gothic chivalry or romance' (48). Faced with such an opponent, Warton included a section in his own *Observations* entitled 'Mr. Upton's opinion, concerning several passages in Spenser, examined', which

identifies and challenges problems with Upton's notes and emendations. Establishing his own reputation and the validity of his approach to the text required challenging Upton, with greater politeness than Ritson would later extend to him, yet still an attack (although, as Fairer establishes, Warton's performance of urbane politeness was itself a challenge). Warton's *Observations* received their own challenges in turn, such as William Huggins' *The Observer Observ'd* (1756).<sup>9</sup> Huggins was the translator of *Orlando Furioso*, and saw Warton's favourable comparison of Spenser with Ariosto (and by implication of Warton with Huggins) as a symptom of the practice of scholarship as a zero-sum game, accusing Warton of 'pulling down another's merit to set up his own' (4). Huggins begins his attack on Warton's *Observations* with a reflection on the problem of criticism in the scholarly community:

It has frequently given me a disagreeable concern in companies, where each is well capacitated to judge for themselves, to find a general Alarm, at some one's beginning to make remarks on any production set before him; attended with an united cry, *O, this Gentleman is a Critic!* Taking that title in as evil a sense, as Smugglers, or other delinquents against the law, would an Informer: when really the term means no more than, that he is one of themselves; provided they did but divest themselves of that unsuitable modesty, or rather more frequently, that thoughtless indolence, which renders people either afraid to utter their sentiments, or too incurious, for want of practice, to form any.

Community risks becoming conspiracy, if criticism is not permitted. Huggins' pamphlet is a deeply personal attack on the qualifications and behaviour of a young scholar, venturing into occasionally scatological imagery, offered by a competitor implicitly demonstrating his own qualifications.

Ritson, writing in the 1780s, worked within a different literary culture than that of Pope and Theobald in the 1720s, or Warton and Huggins in the 1750s, yet still

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Brody Kramnick discusses this earlier controversy, and its relevance to the construction of the English canon, in *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770*.

one, as the *Gentleman's Magazine* argued, in which it was difficult to disentangle 'free enquiry, and a love of truth and liberty' from 'blackguardism'. In the examples given, these attacks could serve a range of different purposes. Donald McNicol's *Remarks on Sr. Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides* (1779) begins with a reflection on the limited readership of derivative works, as 'answers to eminent writers are generally indebted, for their sale and circulation, to the works which they endeavour to refute' (viii). McNicol's *Remarks* shift between attacks on Johnson's character and a detailed refutation of Johnson's insults to Scotland, the Gaelic language, and Ossian. However, some of these attacks are believed to have been introduced by Macpherson before McNicol's *Remarks* were printed (Fleeman xxxiv). 'in history, Stewart, Robertson' may refer to Gilbert Stuart's *Critical Observations concerning the Scottish Historians: Hume, Stuart, and Robertson* (1782), in which Stuart compares William Robertson unfavourably to Hume, and to himself. William Zacks, writing the biography of another Drawcansir, places Stuart's *Critical Observations* in the context of an elaborate and 'well-planned campaign' on the part of Stuart and his publisher Murray to attract attention to Stuart's works (166). Joseph Priestley's *Remarks on Some Paragraphs In the Fourth Volume of Dr. Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, Relating to the Dissenters* (1769) is a response to 'the most injurious reflections on that part of the community to which I belong' (1). Blackstone is not merely a respected writer, 'he is supposed to possess the confidence of the present ministry' and 'his sentiments should be considered as a notification to Dissenters, in what light they are regarded by those who are in power' (2). The examples given in the *Gentleman's Magazine* cover a wide range of works and suggest a spectrum from literary criticism with political undertones to the more significant pamphlet wars of the period.

Pamphlets enumerating the flaws in a popular work continued to be used as both a methodological challenge and a form of self-promotion, as Theobald had done at the beginning of the century. Haslewood, summarizing the controversy caused by Ritson's *Observations* in his 1824 *Account*, condemns the *Observations* as evidence of 'unprovoked and most indefensible irascibility of temper' and notes that one of the 'principal parties' was John Bowle, whose Spanish edition of *Don Quixote* had 'experienced a similar attack from Baretti' (7). Baretti's *Tolondron* (1786) takes the



form of ‘speeches to John Bowles’, like Ritson addressing his opponent directly in the second person, and begins with an anecdote describing an earlier meeting between Bowles and Baretti, in which the latter became convinced that the former was incompetent, held an undeserved reputation, and would do readers a great disservice unless corrected. As Frans De Bruyn notes, Baretti attacked Bowles ‘in a polemic of extraordinary violence, even by the combative standards of eighteenth-century controversy’ (43). De Bruyn, examining the English reception of *Don Quixote*, demonstrates the ways in which these exchanges engaged with larger trends, as Baretti’s criticism of Bowles’s extensive annotations ‘ran counter, in fact, to a nascent historicizing consciousness in the late eighteenth century that was redefining Europe’s medieval past’: ‘Baretti’s reaction suggests that the idea of deploying the panoply of humanist textual scholarship on a work of comic prose fiction, however illustrious, remained for many late-eighteenth-century readers a misconceived critical ambition’ (43). Polemics such as Ritson’s *Observations* or Baretti’s *Tolondron* engaged directly with the changing methodologies of vernacular scholarship – Ritson demanding the extension of ever more rigorous methods to more marginal texts; Baretti deriding the same – and provided a venue for self-promotion through a demonstration of superior scholarship. Much like the earlier Spenserian debates among Upton, Warton and Huggins, Baretti offers an argument about what kind of knowledge and background is required for a work such as an edition of *Don Quixote*, with the implication that he, rather than Bowles, is far more qualified.

Ritson was not the only writer attacking Warton in 1782. Warton’s first reaction to Ritson’s *Observations* was to consider and then reject the possibility that it originated from ‘the Rowley quarter’. The reviewer for the *British Magazine and Review* suggested that the author of the *Observations* might be ‘one of the advocates for the authenticity of the Poems attributed to Rowley, who have been so ingeniously foiled by Mr. Warton’s late publication on that subject’ (363). In fact, the falsity of the Rowley poems was one area in which Warton and Ritson were in accord. However, another pamphlet, which has sometimes been incorrectly attributed to Ritson, *Remarks upon the Eighth Section of the Second Volume of Mr. Warton’s History of English Poetry*, had been published in 1780 by an unknown author who

championed the authenticity of the Rowley poems (Bronson 333). A letter was published in the *St. James's Chronicle* shortly after the publication of Ritson's *Observations*, beginning 'How are the Mighty fallen', attacking the accuracy of Warton's *History*, calling him 'the Usurper of the Throne of ancient English Literature' who will now be recognized as such: 'your Altars are demolished, your Molten Images are cast down and broken, and your Divinity is no more' (qtd. in Bronson 333). However, even the writer of this letter (it is signed 'Rowleiophus') feels the need to note that 'I can by no Means approve of the (in some Instances) severe Language in which [Ritson's *Observations*] are couched' (333).

Thomas Tyrwhitt's edition of *Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley and others, in the Fifteenth Century*, was published in 1777, leading to an escalation of a multi-faceted controversy. In "'Truth Sacrificing to the Muses": The Rowley Controversy and the Genesis of the Romantic Chatterton', Maria Grazia Lolla contrasts the statements of contemporaries who noted that the most prominent and erudite scholars of the day participated in the controversy, with the nineteenth and twentieth century critics who have 'invariably read the discussion as an embarrassment to scholarship' (152). Lolla argues that the controversy was always about more than simply the authenticity of the poems themselves, beginning in earnest only after the posthumous publication of the poems, mostly by editors, principally Tyrwhitt, who accepted them as modern productions (153). The Rowley controversy provided an opportunity to challenge the authority of established scholars such as Tyrwhitt, Malone and Warton. Lolla observes that 'the so-called Rowleyans, in fact, hardly argued in favour of Rowley.... Instead they turned Rowley into the vehicle of a larger offensive on scholars of established reputation', principally, and significantly, Warton and Malone (158). Many responded to Warton's remarks in the second volume of the *History of English Poetry* with accusations that Warton's arguments were flawed and unreliable, rather than arguing that his conclusions were incorrect, while some 'entered the controversy sometimes with the sole purpose of challenging Warton's authority to speak on matters unrelated to Rowley' (158). Similarly, unrelated challenges to Warton's authority and methodology, such as Ritson's attacks, were interpreted in the context of the Rowley controversy, as 'allegiance to Rowley was the metonym for rebellion

against established scholarship' (159). Challenged on antiquarian detail, scholars such as Warton and Malone argued for the importance of taste, and 'proclaimed their right to be the sole arbiters and custodians of the national literature, dictating the terms of the discussion' (159). Lolla observes that the Chatterton controversy illustrates the ways in which different disciplines were emerging at the time: if Chatterton had not produced *poetry*, the controversy would have proceeded very differently (166).

Lolla argues that the Rowley controversy provided an opportunity to challenge 'not only the Anti-Rowleyans' dubious scholarship but also their "system", or, in contemporary terms, their history and theory of literature', attributing the length and intensity of the controversy to these deeper motivations: 'no evidence could be definitive, when at play were expectations, biases, assumptions, predilections, and incompatible approaches to research' (160, 165). The controversy was not merely, or even primarily, about the authenticity of the Rowley poems, but provided the opportunity to argue for very different views of the past: 'Whereas the Anti-Rowleyans viewed the past as the checkpoint of their own refinement, the Rowleyans deferred to the same past with awe and reverence and promoted a version of it which contemplated a large body of attractive literature and the promise of finding more' (165). The Rowleyans emphasised their own ignorance, the impossibility of definitive statements about what was possible in any period, given the limitations of the available evidence, in contrast to the 'approach that organized the past into an all-explicatory system which permitted predictions and judgments on antiquity' (165). Lolla argues that while the Rowleyans 'were ultimately disqualified by the fact that Rowley was not, in fact, authentic' their underlying challenges remained potent (166).

Literary forgery, and debates about literary forgery, were a pervasive feature of this period. Nick Groom, in *Forger's Shadow* (2003), argues that 'forgery waxed and waned at the same time as the Romantic movement, and is profoundly implicated therein. So Romanticism (for want of a better term) would have been very different without literary forgery – indeed it would not have recognizably existed at all' (15). Susan Stewart examines the intersections of literature and law in *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (1991), situating the

‘scandals of the ballad’ and other scandals within a broader context of ‘the eighteenth-century transformation of the literary marketplace – the decline of patronage, the rise of booksellers, the advent of mass literary production and copyright, the development of the concept of “intellectual property”’ (4). Margaret Russett in *Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Authenticity, 1760-1845* (2006) argues that ‘modern subjectivity should be understood as a subset and, to some extent, as a precipitate of the representational practices the Romantics called “romance,” but which, in their derogated forms, also go by such names as “imposture,” “forgery,” “plagiarism,” and “delusion”’ (5).

Ritson’s own works were produced against a backdrop of literary antiquarian controversies. Ossian cast a long shadow over any study of early literature. Ritson’s first works appeared and were received within the context of the Rowley controversy. The controversy caused by the ‘discovery’ of lost Shakespearean manuscripts by William Henry Ireland raged during one of Ritson’s most productive periods. In an essay on the Ireland forgeries, ‘Trouble in the Republic of Letters’, Robert Miles identifies a factional dynamic in the controversy of the 1790s, one which became increasingly politically charged. Once Malone had claimed the right to judge the authenticity of the work, and aligned his stance with ‘Burke and Royalism’, accusing the supporters of Ireland of sympathy for the French Revolution, the battle lines had been effectively drawn (333). George Chalmers, Miles argues, produced three lengthy works defending the believers, despite knowing the works were forgeries, using language that echoed *The Rights of Man* (334).

Ritson took no public role in these debates, despite being perfectly situated to do so. Ritson, who presented himself as the defender of truth and an expert in early English literature, could not defend the authenticity of Rowley or the Ireland forgeries (in his letters, he offers his correspondents trenchant observations on their production). However, he could not attack their authenticity without aligning himself with Warton or Malone, respectively, and their claims for authority. Rather than attack clear cut instances of forgery, Ritson brought the rhetoric and intensity of those debates to bear on Percy’s sophistication and Warton’s occasional sloppiness.

**‘O Rare T.W.!’**

In the *Observations* and the *Remarks*, Ritson attacked well-known works and their authors and demonstrated his own qualifications, largely derived from the research that he had undertaken in the British Museum and other public and private collections. In neither the *Observations* nor the *Remarks* does Ritson develop new standards or approaches. Rather, he calls Warton, Percy, and the editors of Shakespeare to account for their failure to adhere to their own professed standards. In 1754, Warton had argued in his *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* that it is necessary to approach early works with a knowledge of their context, as they may be profoundly influenced ‘by very familiar and reigning appearances, which are utterly different from those which we are at present surrounded’ (217). In his *Observations*, Warton illustrates the importance of a wide and varied reading for editors of older material. Words, phrases, or allusions which are unknown to an eighteenth-century reader, and thus likely to be treated as errors in need of correction, can be rendered intelligible through a better knowledge of the author’s context. Consequently, Warton engages with early modern and medieval English texts to a much greater degree than any other writer at the time. However, they are still kept at a distance: useful, even required, for interpreting a small number of canonical works, but not necessarily of interest to the general reader. Warton’s treatment of Spenser follows the incorporation of the writer into a canon of English ‘classics’, to whom the traditions of humanist scholarship might be applied.

In the earlier periods covered by of his *History of English Poetry* Warton was dealing primarily with material that had not been previously edited or printed, and so he found it necessary to provide copious extracts from the early poems, declaring:

I hope to merit the thanks of the antiquarian, for enriching the stock of our early literature by these new accessions: and I trust I shall gratify the reader of taste, in having so frequently rescued from oblivion the rude inventions and irregular beauties of the heroic tale, or the romantic legend. (viii)

Warton needed his *History* to serve different functions, and different audiences. The works discussed in the *History* must serve as an illustration of the gradual refinement of poetry, as a source for historical information about past societies, and as a

representation of the changing language, while the *History* itself must serve both the ‘antiquarian’ and the ‘reader of taste’. Ritson begins his *Observations* by responding directly to Warton’s claim:

Whether you have gratified “the reader of taste,” by your exertions on this subject, I know not; but of this I am confident, that “the antiquarian” will have greater reason to be dissatisfied with being perplexed or misled, than to thank you for having engaged in a task for which it will appear you have been so little qualified. (3)

This conflict, between the ‘antiquarian’ and the ‘reader of taste’, has proved central to understanding the conflicts in which Ritson participated. Ritson’s relentless emphasis on the texts, on proof, on the limits of certainty, signal his allegiance to the antiquary rather than the ‘reader of taste’.

Despite the tendency for the contemporary reviews to downplay the significance of the errors identified by Ritson, a close reading of his *Observations* reveals a complex engagement with the question of how literary scholarship should be conducted (the revised editions of Warton’s *History* produced in the nineteenth century incorporated much of Ritson’s criticism). Throughout the *Observations*, Ritson attacks Warton’s accuracy in reproducing and interpreting his texts. Through his identification of errors, Ritson outlines a model of what a competent treatment of early literature would entail. The most common, and simplest, corrections are challenges to Warton’s glosses and translations, often with sarcastic remarks: ‘writers who want in knowledge should abound in care’, ‘It may not be improper, once for all, to warn the reader, that you interpret everywhere at random; and not because you perfectly understand, but because you are entirely ignorant’ (6). One entry notes that Warton has on two pages glossed the same word as ‘well, good’ and ‘vile’ (7). Another simply quotes Warton and then declares ‘O rare T.W.!’ (11). Ritson attacks the foundations of Warton’s claims to expertise: the wide knowledge of early language and literature that allows him to mediate the extracted texts for a refined audience.

Throughout the *Observations*, Ritson asserts that Warton is too quick to make unsupported declarations, offering definitive statements about the date of poems or outlining his elaborate theories on the origin of romance. Ritson is concerned with

the limits of certainty, which he argues that Warton too often oversteps. In one entry, he observes that Warton has provided a detailed description of a fifteenth-century buffoon, John Scogan, noting ‘You could scarcely have given the gentleman a more particular description, if you had enjoyed the pleasure of a *tête-à-tête* with him. But where is your authority for it?’ (18). For Ritson, ‘authority’ is a key term, and nearly always means an identifiable text. Ritson lists the fragmentary and contradictory evidence at great length (and includes, as a footnote, an example of the stories attached to the character, ‘How Scogin let a fart, and said it was worth forty pounds’), undermining Warton’s confident assertions (18-20). Unlike Warton, Ritson does not attempt to resolve these fragments and contradictions into a definitive statement. While the attempt to reconstruct the biography of a buffoon is deliberately ridiculous, Ritson’s challenge to Warton’s methodology is serious. His own approach, in which an exhaustive treatment of all known fragmentary evidence cannot be cleanly resolved into a simple narrative, anticipates his own writings.

In many passages, Ritson challenges Warton to identify the authorities upon which his claims are based, with particular attention to Warton’s theories of an Arabian origin for romance. Responding to his arguments about the Crusades, Ritson asks, ‘where a romance is to be found, any way near that age, or indeed, of any other, which treats of Trebizond, independent of the history of Charlemagne?’ (8). Responding to Warton’s assertion that ‘the elder Spanish romances have *professedly* more Arabian allusions than any other’ Ritson asks, ‘Will you, Mr. Warton, do us the favour to name a single one of those elder Spanish romances, with *any* Arabian allusion?’ (8, emphasis original). These challenges abound. Ritson demands proof, and he suspects that Warton cannot produce it. Warton’s narrative relies upon the existence of certain kinds of texts at certain times, and Ritson argues that they simply do not exist. He challenges ‘the familiar and confident manner in which you affect to speak of the poets of Britany; of whose writings you never saw a line, nor can you tell where there is one to be found; and for whose history you know not where to look’ (17). Warton’s sometimes conversational style betrays him to mockery: ‘You *think* you have “seen some evidence to prove that Chestre was author of the Erle of Tholouse.” You think so! and expect, I suppose, that your dreams are to pass upon your readers for fact and history? you never could see any such evidence; you never

did see it.’ (17). Ritson had already begun a detailed examination of the manuscript, Caligula A.II, which contains the texts conventionally attributed to Thomas Chestre, and would himself publish in his *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* both the complete texts of *Sir Launfal*, the only text known to have been written by Chestre, and the *Erle of Tolous*. For Ritson, texts are crucial. Any claim that a particular genre, character or plot existed at a particular time and place cannot be made without identifying and naming a text which supports that claim. To claim that certain kinds of texts do *not* exist at all is dangerously arrogant. Yet, at this point, Ritson had spent years fashioning himself into one of the few scholars with such extensive knowledge of the known texts that he could make such a claim authoritatively, and the *Observations* provided him with an opportunity to display that knowledge.

Several notes accuse Warton of not consulting his sources directly, while misleading his readers into believing he had:

I shall not give myself the trouble to minute *every* inaccuracy I might discover in the citations you have introduced from the old metrical legends, between your 7th and 26th page: I take it for granted they are just as correct as I shall prove others to be, which you have given from MSS. In the Cotton and Harleian libraries; many of which, as one may easily perceive, by your method of quoting, referring to, or registering them, you have certainly never seen. (4, emphasis original)

Through these attacks, Ritson positions himself as someone who can speak authoritatively, his identification of the discrepancies in Warton’s account proof of his own careful examination of the manuscripts. In several other notes, Ritson identifies instances where Warton has taken his information from catalogues and other second-hand sources, while implying or claiming that he had consulted the manuscripts or early printed copies themselves.<sup>10</sup> As Warton had observed, the *Observations* left no doubt that their author was a ‘student of the British Museum’, whatever else he might have been.

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<sup>10</sup> George K. Keiser’s article on the Thornton manuscript has identified an additional clear instance of Warton’s having done so, unnoticed by Ritson.



The disparaging references to Thomas Percy embedded throughout the *Observations* are the result of Ritson's commitment to accuracy and transparency. When Ritson challenges Warton's dating of a poem, he notes that 'The Revd. Dr. Percy (now lord bishop of Dromore), whose knowledge in these matters seems pretty much upon a level with your own' had given it another date (4). Unable to identify a poem Warton refers to, Ritson asks, 'The bishop of Dromore says he has it in his FOLIO MS. DID YOU EVER SEE THAT?' (11). The use of a privately owned manuscript, access to which was strictly controlled by someone that Ritson was inclined to distrust, seriously undermined any conclusions which relied on the Percy Folio. When Warton praises a poem by declaring it 'worthy of Doctor Percy's excellent collection', Ritson takes the opportunity to attack Warton's judgement and Percy's editorial priorities:

I really believe, Mr. Warton, that you are the onely person in the world that could think, or would say so. It is a most wretched performance, altogether unworthy of republication: and for the justice of this character, I appeal to the Doctor himself; of whose taste in poetry (that is, where he understands it) I have the highest opinion; and who may, indeed, easily make it deserving of a place in his "excellent collection," if he will but take the same pains with it, which he has taken with most of the other pieces so faithfully reprinted in that celebrated work. (22)

Percy displays excellent taste, but the poetry in his collection is only aesthetically pleasing because it has been heavily altered. In some cases, the errors of Percy and Warton interact dangerously. Ritson identifies a satirical ballad included in both the *Reliques* and the *History*, and quotes Warton's assertion that he had transcribed it himself before seeing it in the *Reliques* (5). However, Percy 'has taken some liberties with the orthography and language (and where is the piece with which he has not taken such liberties?)' and Warton follows all of these changes 'with a most literal and servile exactness', including the omission of a complete stanza (5). Ritson helpfully transcribes the missing stanza 'as it may be some small consolation to you in this unfortunate dilemma' (5). This attack not only epitomizes Ritson's quarrel with Percy's policy of alteration and his assertions that Warton is not sufficiently

transparent in his sources, but illustrates the consequences when these policies are left unchallenged: errors proliferate and spread. In another passage, Ritson insinuates that if Warton had borrowed unacknowledged from better authorities than Percy, the *History* would have been more reliable (30). Through the identification of Warton's errors, Ritson displays his own command of the material. To detect a divergence between the manuscript and Warton's edition requires that Ritson examine the manuscripts carefully, even as he reveals that Warton did not do so. If Warton's mistakes demonstrate that he is insufficiently familiar with the material, Ritson's ability to identify those mistakes demonstrates his superior knowledge. Through the *Observations*, he constructs a public persona, whose authority to comment is justified by a thorough display of knowledge, rather than requiring readers to rely on a previously established reputation.

Ritson's assertions that historical arguments need to be supported by identifiable texts would not have been challenged by either Percy or Warton. Both apologized for the potentially excessive antiquarian elements of their work: apologies that acknowledged the tension between different demands and audiences, while calling attention to their citations and extracts. Warton had justified the inclusion of copious extracts, arguing that they might be of interest to both 'the antiquarian' and 'the man of taste'. In his *Reliques*, Percy apologizes for his frequent naming of his authorities: 'the Editor is afraid he has been sometimes led to make too great a parade of his authorities. The desire of being accurate had perhaps seduced him into too minute and trifling an exactness....It was however necessary to give some account of the old copies' (xii). Percy's editorial policies were based on the assumption that the early texts had to be mediated and often substantially altered to be acceptable, yet their sources still had to be named, highlighting their grounding in a textual rather than an oral culture, despite the emphasis he places on his theoretical minstrels. In Percy's essay 'On the Ancient Metrical Romances', the prolific identification of texts provides evidence to support his claims. However, they are kept carefully subordinated to his overarching narrative. The only text discussed at any length, *Libius Disconius*, can only be approached through a prose paraphrase, while the essay as a whole functions to provide a framework within which the post-medieval material can be interpreted.

The importance of identifiable written sources for works on early vernacular literature was given a particular immediacy by Macpherson's Ossian. In Nick Groom's definitive *The Making of Percy's Reliques*, Groom identifies Macpherson as Percy's 'inspiration, or rather his foil', tracing the connections between Macpherson's Ossian and Percy's minstrels, as 'the two writers derived exclusive methodologies from opposed theories of British history to validate their respective ancient poetry' (61, 62). In 'Thomas Percy's Antiquarian Alternative to Ossian', Robert Rix argues that Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Islandic Language* (1763) and the better known *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) were 'conceived as part of the same national project' and a 'direct response to the "translations" of Ossian' (197). In these works, both Percy's development of his skaldic minstrel theories and the choices which 'reveal that he was anxious to name and document sources' reflect in part a response to the controversy over Macpherson's Ossian poems and an attempt to create a parallel, alternative tradition (220). In his *Five Pieces*, Percy provides translations of poems that he himself could not read, relying on previous translators and commentators, with copious additions 'that he felt restored the spirit of the original' (215-216). However, Percy also appended transcripts of the original poems (214). Rix argues that these 'transcriptions had little use beyond displaying the editor's integrity in relation to Macpherson's uncertain productions': any reader who could make use of the transcripts would have no use for Percy's translations (215). A similar dynamic, although less extreme, can be found in the *Reliques*. In his *Observations*, Ritson does not apologize for demanding accurate and transparent references to identifiable and verifiable texts. Rather than introducing new assumptions, he is holding both writers to an existing standard, claiming the right to evaluate them on the terms that they had introduced.

In his *Observations* Ritson uses the correction of Warton's errors to model the appropriate treatment of early texts. In one instance, he challenges Warton's assertion that Christopher Marlowe's reputation for atheism resulted from a 'wit and spriteliness of conversation' which 'had often the unhappy effect of tempting him to sport with sacred subjects' rather than 'any systematic disbelief of religion' (Warton 3: 437, qtd. in Ritson 39-40). Ritson observes that reports of Marlowe's atheism

seem to correlate with writers' desire to either criticise or praise him (uncannily foreshadowing the ways in which his own disbelief was contested after his death) (40). However, 'not an *iota* of evidence has been produced on either side' (40). Ritson then transcribes 'an old MS. in the Harleian library, cited in one of your notes,' which 'was never before printed' that provides a contemporary description of Marlowe's beliefs: the testimony of Richard Baines to the Privy Council (40). The manuscript is carefully and thoroughly described: its present location, the passages that have been struck out, the words inserted in the margins (40-42). The original spelling and abbreviations are retained. For Ritson, no claims can be made without evidence, and texts claimed as evidence must be accurately and transparently reproduced if they are not available elsewhere. The transcription of this testimony is excessive if Ritson is merely contesting Warton's factual claims. Rather, he is challenging his methodology, and demonstrating his own. The same point is made more playfully earlier in the *Observations*, when Ritson, 'Lest the number and uniformity of these dry expostulations should render them too flat and tedious to yourself, or my other gentle readers' offers to 'endeavour to enliven you and them with an old Christmas carol...now, for the first time, faithfully published from an ancient MS. in my own possession' (36-37).<sup>11</sup> The poem, a Tudor carol, is scrupulously transcribed, demonstrating once more Ritson's own commitment to accuracy. In a ostentatious flourish that I believe has not been previously noticed, this carol was submitted to the section of 'select poetry, ancient and modern' of the *Gentleman's Magazine* appearing in the issue of November, 1782 with title 'A Christmas Carol' and a the note that 'The music which accompanies this Carol is in the possession of the author of "Observations on Mr. Warton's History of English Poetry"' (543). This oblique advertisement for the *Observations* appears ten pages after the outraged letter defending Warton. Two texts of significant value to the study of early English literature – the one now a commonplace in introductions to

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<sup>11</sup> Now in the British Library, Additional Manuscript 5665. Ritson presented this collection and another (now Add. 5666) to the British Library in 1795. The most complete account of this manuscript can be found in Katherine Miller's dissertation.

Marlowe, the other a popular traditional carol – were thus first edited and printed as a rhetorical flourish within the polemic of eighteenth-century literary controversy.

**‘So much for dr. Johnson’**

As in his attack on Warton, the *Remarks* provide Ritson with an opportunity to outline and demonstrate his own methodology. Once again, Ritson does not offer a revolutionary approach, but calls his predecessors to account for failing to adhere to their stated standards. Ritson offers a clear statement of editorial principle in the preface:

The chief and fundamental business of an editor is carefully to collate the original and authentic editions of his author. It is otherwise impossible for him to be certain that he is giving the genuine text, because he does not know what that text is. There have been no less than eight professed editors of Shakspeare; and yet the old copies, of which we have heard so much, have never been collated by any one of them: no, not even either of the two first folios, books indifferently common, and quoted by everybody. And yet, strange as it may seem, not one of the eight but has taken the credit of, or actually asserted, his having collated them. One may be well allowed to pass by the pretensions of those prior to dr. Johnson without particular notice; their falsehood is sufficiently apparent in the margin of the late edition. Surely, men who thus proudly expose and severely reprobate the crimes of their neighbours should effectually guard themselves against similar accusations. (ii-iii)

Johnson’s authority rests on a claim, quoted and cited by Ritson, to have collated his texts, his supersession of the earlier editions rests on a claim that they did not. Demonstrating that Johnson failed to comprehensively collate the early editions allows Ritson to dismiss Johnson on the terms that Johnson had introduced:

The text of his own edition, the notes of mr. Steevens, and, in some respect, the remarks in the following sheets, will prove that he never collated any one of the folios, – no not for a single play, – or at least that of his collations he has made little or no use. That he picked out a

reading here and there from the old editions, is true: all his predecessors did the same: but this is not *collation*. So much for dr. Johnson. (iv, emphasis original)

Steevens has repeated the claims for the new edition, again carefully quoted and cited, leading to Malone's conclusion that 'the text of this author seems now finally settled' (qtd. in *Remarks* v). Ritson is characteristically unimpressed:

To what better cause can we ascribe such unfounded assertions than to indolence and temerity? Since, had the ingenious writer compared the old and present editions through a single play, he must necessarily have perceived, that all the old copies had not been diligently collated, and that the text is no more finally settled at present than it was in the time of Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton: nay, that it is, at large, in the same state of inaccuracy and corruption in which it was left by mr. Rowe. (v)

With his quotations and direct responses, Ritson claims the right to participate in a conversation, and places himself within the history of contested scholarship that he invokes. The claims of Johnson, Steevens, and Malone are not allowed to function as authoritative pronouncements, but are seized by Ritson to form an involuntary dialogue.

Ritson's *Remarks* are eclectic, proceeding page by page through the ten volumes of Johnson and Steevens' edition. Like the *Observations*, they offer, along with invective and quibbles of minor interest when they first appeared, and none now, a knowledgeable engagement with the practice of literary research and textual editing. Ritson is, as in his *Observations* on Warton, sometimes more interested in arguments than conclusions. In the first 'remark', he offers a detailed critique of previous editors' consideration of the spelling of the bard's name as 'Shakspeare' – a conclusion with which he wholeheartedly agrees – arguing that they have offered insufficient evidence. This, of course, gives him space to demonstrate his thorough knowledge of the surviving documentary evidence.

Some notes gesture towards Ritson's other interests and future projects. A note on the 'Pageant of the Nine Worthies' in *Love's Labour's Lost* offers Ritson some space to briefly quote from examples of medieval drama known to him,

drawing on the Harley and Tanner collections, demonstrating the resources which he could bring to Shakespearean annotation (38-40). In a note to the sixth canto of *Marmion*, Walter Scott reports that Ritson had planned an edition of the Chester Mysteries, but his few notes were lost, leaving only his brief observations in the *Remarks* as evidence of his research into medieval drama (ci-cii). An ill-advised note on the *Comedy of Errors* prompts Ritson to respond:

“Adam Bell,” says dr. Johnson, “was a companion of Robin Hood, as may be seen in Robin Hoods garland; in which, if I do not mistake,” adds he, “are these lines [...]”

In answer to this it may be observed, 1. That Adam Bell was *not* a companion of Robin Hood; 2. That it *cannot* be seen in Robin Hoods garland; 3. That the lines quoted prove neither the one nor the other, as they do not relate to *Robin Hood*. It is peculiarly unfortunate that the learned critic should be most mistaken where he is most confident.  
(30)

The study of Shakespeare’s sources provided justification, and a degree of legitimacy, for many other areas of study. In his later collections, *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* and *Robin Hood*, Ritson provided authoritative editions of the earliest surviving ballads relating to Adam Bell and Robin Hood.

Ritson is even able to continue the attack on Warton and Percy. Warton’s contribution of a note on an early ballad on the subject of *Romeo and Juliet* merits the response:

Where is this same ballad to be found? Or who ever saw it? The *information* is – MR. WARTONS! (56, emphasis original)

A reference by Percy to a poem found in his Folio MS provides the opportunity for Ritson to offer a broad condemnation of the practice of referencing inaccessible manuscripts, and the particular challenge posed by Percy’s strict control:

It is a very common, but, at the same time, a very unreasonable practice in commentators and others, to bid their readers *see* this or that scarce book, of which it is, as they well know, frequently impossible for them to procure a sight. But never was this absurdity carried to such an extent of mockery as it is in the present instance;

where the learned prelate very coolly orders us to *inspect* a poem, onely extant, as he is well assured, and has elsewhere told us, in a certain Folio MS in *his own possession*, which, perhaps, no one *ever saw*, and which (if it really exist) he will, for his own sake, take effectual care that no one *shall see*. (167, emphasis original)

Objections to Percy's manuscript are not merely accusations of personal dishonesty, but an engagement with standards of evidence that support literary antiquarian research.

In many notes, he offers support for his primary accusation that Johnson and Steevens had failed to adequately collate the early editions, often expanded with a demonstration of how collation could be combined with a knowledge of archaic language and etymology to resolve textual cruxes. For example, a note on Prospero's declaration that he had been '*wrapp'd* in secret studies' responds:

And could this bald and threadbare phrase have passed the examination of judicial collaters [*sic*] and correctors of Shakspeares text? Would not *rapt* have been a fair and probable conjecture, even if it had *not* been, *as it is*, the reading of the old editions? And could it, possibly, have escaped the observation of any person who had made *a constant comparison with the most authentic copies*? (4, emphasis original)

Another note on the use of 'stay yet a while' in *Measure of Measure* simply notes that 'The old copies, which dr. Johnson pretends to have collated, read *Stay a little while*' (19).

In other passages, Ritson objects to Steevens' stated reasons for preferring emendations (his own or other early editors') to the readings of the old copies. Referring to an emendation first suggested by Pope, Ritson asks, 'what authority had mr. Pope to make the alteration? and why is it followed?' (176). Ritson's preferences are generally, but not entirely, conservative, suggesting careful emendations in the case of demonstrable nonsense, but not when editors think that the poetry can be improved, and he is devastating when ignorance leads editors to offer unnecessary corrections, noting that Johnson's 'alchemy only serves to convert *gold* to *lead*: he has a very ready knack at changing the most perfect *sense* to the most absolute



*nonsense*' (209). He responds to Steevens' justification of the change from feminine to masculine pronouns for the personification of the Tiber, to bring Shakespeare into line with Milton, with the objection: 'This may be true, but it is the duty of the editor to give what his author actually wrote, and not what he should have written' (143). Johnson's preference for 'groan' rather than 'grunt' in Hamlet's soliloquy provides an opportunity for a condemnation of excessive editorial intervention:

Dr. Johnson is for or against Shakspeares own words just as it suits his purpose or inclination: if *grunt* (the reading of *all* the old copies) be to be changed to *groan* merely because (as he says) *it can scarcely be borne by modern ears*, Shakspeare may be so transmografyed (how do your ears bear that, dr. Johnson?) and frittered away, by his friendly editors, in the course of a few years, that, if he were to rise from the dead, he could not possibly know his own work. (200, emphasis original)

Ritson does not merely identify mistakes, he engages with the editorial principles that underlay these decisions, and uses his objections to articulate his own.

In other notes, Ritson argues that an incomplete knowledge of the language has led previous editors astray. He objects to Steevens' glossarial note to Miranda's 'More to know / Did never *meddle* with my thoughts', observing that:

To *meddle*, says mr. Steevens, in this instance, signifies to *minge*. Hence, adds he, the substantive *medley*. But it should rather mean to *interfere*, to *trouble*, to *busy it self*, as still used in the North: *e.g.* Don't *meddle with me*: i.e Let me alone; Don't molest me. *Medley* can scarce be formed of *meddle*: it is, most likely, a corruption of the French word, *mesléé*. (4)

The use of 'kinsman to grim and comfortless despair' in *The Comedy of Errors* to describe melancholy, personified as female, provoked a series of exchanges, which Ritson suggested could be resolved with an awareness of Shakespeare's usage:

Shakespeare, says dr. Warburton, could never make melancholy a *male* in one line, and a *female* in the next, he therefor boldly pronounces the line the foolish insertion of the first editors; as if such fools could write as well as Shakespeare.

Mr. Heath, in his fanciful way, proposes a different reading, while Mr. Steevens is contented with ridiculing the preciseness and affectation of Master Capell.

But, after all, the text is very clear and intelligible, and certainly right. *Kinsman* means no more than *near relation*. Many words are used by Shakespeare with much greater latitude. (27)

Ritson inserts himself into an ongoing debate. As Bronson notes, Ritson is particularly scathing in his objections to Johnson's glossarial notes, on the basis that the compiler of the dictionary ought to know better (436). There are nearly three dozen objections to Johnson's glosses, many of them sarcastic. For example, Johnson's gloss on York's remark in I Henry IV that 'I am lowted by a traitor villain' suggests that '*lowt* may signify to *depress*, to *lower*, to *dishonour*; but I do not remember it so used', to which Ritson replies, 'A *lout* is a country fellow, a clown. He means that Somerset treats him like a hind. Dr. Johnson had better let such words alone, as he does not understand. *Lowted*, in his dictionary, is *overpowered*' (117).

As Marcus Walsh demonstrates, the editing of Shakespeare had become increasingly sophisticated over the course of the eighteenth century, shifting gradually and unevenly from an aesthetic to an authorial orientation (*Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing* 9). As this shift occurred, the study of other early English literary sources increased:

Their turn from an aesthetic to an authorial orientation involved a movement away from absorption in the editor's personal taste and contemporary culture, towards a belief that earlier literature must be interpreted, as well as evaluated, within the horizons of its own moment of production. Their development of historicizing scholarship is highly significant in relation to this turn. (23)

Ritson's list of objections to his predecessors provides a striking window into this development. His objections to emendations justified by poetic sensibility, and his recognition that this would result in a Shakespeare transmogrified to reflect contemporary sensibilities, were a part of a sea-change that took place over the course of the century. His objections to the glossarial notes illustrate the

‘development of historicizing scholarship’ that Walsh identifies – if they had read more, known more about the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, they would not make such egregious mistakes.

Most audaciously of all, as Steevens had warned Warton, the *Remarks* were intended to pave the way for an edition of Shakespeare edited by Ritson. The outline of this project is appended to the *Remarks*, and offers a succinct and sensible description of an editorial policy:

This edition will be comprised in eight duodecimo volumes; and will be carefully and accurately printed from the onely copies of real authority, the two first folios. But although these editions will be the standard of the intended work, such passages in the old quartos as may appear to have been omitted by accident, or with a view to shorten the representation, and every various reading, will be maturely considered, and, if worthy of insertion, be adopted, either in the text or margin, as their importance or merit may seem to require. No variation, however, will be made from the standard editions without apprising the reader of it, unless the difference should consist merely in a slight typographical error. Nor is any difference between the various editions in other respects intended to be otherwise than occasionally regarded. The orthography will be reduced with the utmost care to a modern and uniform system, except where a change would be injurious to the authors sense and meaning. Various or doubtful readings will be settled from an attentive examination of the sentiments of every commentator. The notes, which will be very sparingly introduced, and never but where they seem absolutely necessary, or peculiarly proper, will be chiefly extracted, under the names of their respective authors, from the editions of Theobald, Warburton, Johnson, and Steevens; but not to the exclusion of better, though, perhaps, anonymous, intelligence, if it can be given. It is, however, no part of the editors design to fill his margin with a view of the corruptions, or a refutation of preceding commentators.

This edition was carefully considered, balancing a careful accuracy with the needs of readers – the small size and the scrupulous but restrained use of notes filling a gap in the market as new editions became increasingly cluttered and unwieldy. However, the only portion of the eight duodecimo volumes to appear was a printed sample of a single gathering of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, dated 1787, the only known copy of which is preserved in the Douce collection (Bronson 462).

While Ritson could reconcile with Steevens, there would be no rapprochement with Malone, not least because Ritson kept up a sustained attack with his *Cursory Criticisms*. Moreover, Malone came to see Ritson as a direct competitor. In September of 1783 he wrote to Percy, explaining his plans for ‘a portable edition, in ten volumes 12mo’, acknowledging that ‘Mr. Ritson has in some measure been the cause of my undertaking this work’:

At the end of his very impudent and scurrilous pamphlet, in which I have the honour to be abused very liberally in common with your Lordship, Dr J, Mr T. &c. he has published proposals for an edition in six volumes octavo, on this contracted plan. I immediately resolved that he should not deck himself in our feathers, and offered my services without fee or reward for the booksellers, who instantly accepted them. (Bronson 264)

Although Ritson’s edition was never completed, Malone continued to view him as a potential competitor, even posthumously, and Shakespearean scholarship continued to exert a significant influence on his work on early English literature.

## Chapter 2: A Student of the British Museum

As Warton recognized, from the *Observations* alone it is clear that Ritson was a ‘student of the British Museum’. Asked to identify the author of the attack on Warton, both Steevens and Lort placed Ritson in the Reading Rooms of Museum, Steevens reporting that ‘I have often found your assailant at the Museum’ while Lort relayed that ‘he has been digging hard in the Museum mines for some time past’ (*Correspondence of Thomas Warton* 461; *Nichols Illustrations* VII: 443). In a letter from 1801, George Ellis wrote to Walter Scott describing the dissolution of Ritson’s long friendship with Francis Douce, marvelling that Ritson found time to quarrel, ‘much occupied with printer’s devils’ and ‘daily visits to the Museum’, and that he would ‘never taste another drop of tea in Douce’s house; never commune with him in the Museum reading room, never exchange with him the common forms of civility!’ (MS 873 21v). Ellis portrays the Reading Room as a potentially social space, although this is only visible once it has been disrupted. After Ritson’s death, those of his early biographers who sought to downplay the controversial persona developed in his published work emphasized the role of the British Museum in Ritson’s research and daily life. Robert Surtees describes how ‘In the British Museum he revelled in stores then but little explored’ as well as visits to Oxford and Cambridge, describing his daily life as limited to the walk between his chambers and the Museum. Joseph Haslewood, describing the challenge posed to a biographer by a life with little excitement, added book-auctions to public libraries in a description of Ritson’s daily routine. In this chapter, I address the significance of Ritson’s status as a student of the British Museum. The British Museum made Ritson’s work possible. Ritson’s use of the collections of the British Museum illustrates the ways in which the Museum supported the study of early English literature during a relatively uneventful and uninspiring period of its history. The first portion of the chapter will use the records kept of Ritson’s requests to establish several broad trends in his use of the manuscript collections of the British Museum, placing Ritson’s practice in the context of the nature of the Museum collections in this period. The second will demonstrate the ways in which Ritson applied an antiquarian sensibility to literary material, with significant results.

**‘In the British Museum he revelled in stores then but little explored’**

Bronson establishes the importance of the period between Ritson’s arrival in London and the publication of the *Observations and Remarks*:

The years 1776-1781 are of the highest importance in the light of Ritson’s later accomplishment. Next to nothing, however, is discoverable about them: they seem almost barren of outward event. But they must have been years of intense and unremitting application to the study of what was then called “black-letter learning”. For when the silence is definitely broken, the obscure young lawyer’s clerk is seen to have overcome superbly the handicap of his educational deficiencies. He has made himself one of the best informed men of his time in fields where accurate knowledge was then peculiarly difficult of attainment, and is ready to challenge the world of scholarship as a master of English literary history in its most recondite passages. (56)

However, there are some records of Ritson’s research during these years, unutilized by Bronson. The British Museum kept a ‘Register of Manuscripts Sent to the Reading Room of the British Museum’, now additional MSS 45610-45615 for the relevant years. Ritson’s use of the manuscript collections of the British Museum can be reconstructed in some detail, while his correspondence and unpublished works offer further clues to the research he conducted elsewhere. The tall, narrow manuscript registers record in one column the date, the shelfmark of the manuscripts requested, and the name of the requester, and in another column on the facing page the date the manuscripts were returned. The registers reveal an extraordinary programme of research. Between the first unambiguous record of a request by Ritson in April of 1776, and August of 1782, when he wrote to a friend that he had placed the *Observations* into the hands of a bookseller, Ritson requested roughly 590 manuscripts. Table 1 provides a chart of the number of requests in this period, arranged by month. Table 2 provides an overview of Ritson’s requests from his arrival in London until his death in 1803. The register only records the dates on which manuscripts were requested and returned, not those on which manuscripts which had been requested and delivered were consulted (and they may not have been delivered on the day they were requested), yet it is clear that during several periods

Ritson visited the Reading Room at least three times a week. As Percy and Warton's correspondents noted, during this time Ritson was also establishing himself professionally as a conveyancer, with some success.

The record of Ritson's requests sheds light on his use of the Museum collections. Generally, Ritson requests two manuscripts, returning them on the same or the next day. During some periods, he makes his way systematically through a shelfmark. Later, he returns to particular manuscripts for longer periods, presumably studying them in more detail, and making the transcripts which provided the raw material for his edited collections. Table 3 records the frequency of the differences between the date requested and the date returned, as recorded in the registers, discarding any dates that are not clear. Over the entire period of Ritson's research in the British Museum, nearly thirty percent of requested manuscripts were returned on the same day that they were requested. Nearly half were returned either on the same day or the next. The majority of manuscripts which Ritson requested were examined briefly and then returned, and were not requested again. However, once Ritson had identified a significant manuscript, he examined it in more detail. Consider three of the manuscripts which Ritson named in the *Observations* as instances in which Warton's extracts deviated significantly from his manuscript source: Harley 2253, Caligula A.II and Galba E.IX.

Harley 2253	
Requested	Returned
18 Oct, 1776	20 Oct, 1776
6 May, 1778	6 May, 1778
12 May, 1778	5 June, 1778
4 February, 1785	24 February, 1785
5 April, 1785	12 April, 1785
24 May, 1785	[No date recorded]
18 October, 1797	6 November, 1797
19 October, 1801	10 November, 1801
7 April, 1803	7 April, 1803

Caligula A.II.	
Requested	Returned
14 October, 1776	14 October, 1776
3 March, 1777	19 March, 1777
10 September, 1778	30 September, 1778
4 January, 1779	February, 1779
13 May, 1779	21 May, 1779
31 May, 1779	20 August, 1779
26 August, 1779	28 August, 1779
15 December, 1779	24 December, 1779
1 February, 1780	23 February, 1780
5 April, 1780	12 May, 1780
22 May, 1780	9 August, 1780
25 January, 1787	12 February, 1787
15 October, 1792	16 October, 1792
3 February, 1797	9 February, 1797
6 August, 1801	21 August, 1801
13 October, 1801	24 December, 1801
22 March, 1802	15 April, 1802
22 June, 1802	28 June, 1802



Galba E.IX.	
Requested	Returned
29 April, 1777	30 April, 1777
15 July, 1780	4 December, 1780
16 July, 1781	17 July, 1781
14 April, 1794	16 April, 1794
12 May, 1794	13 May, 1794
19 May, 1801	22 May, 1801
1 June, 1801	8 July, 1801
10 July, 1801	8 August, 1801

In each case, Ritson makes an initial request, returning the manuscript within two days, before returning to the manuscript for longer periods, months or even years later. In each case, he had made a detailed study of the manuscript before the publication of the *Observations*, allowing him to identify the ways in which Warton's extracts or description deviated from the manuscript. Furthermore, all three of these manuscripts formed the foundation for Ritson's later publications, providing the authority for texts included in *Ancient Songs* (1790) and *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* (1802). For example, the requests for Harley 2253 can be roughly grouped into three periods: the preparation of the *Observations*, the preparation of *Ancient Songs*, and the preparation of *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*.

This strategy was not unusual. As the collections were often poorly or inaccurately catalogued during this period, early researchers often spent considerable time familiarizing themselves with the contents of the collections, later returning to make a detailed study of the material they had identified as relevant. For example, in October of 1776, when he first requested both Caligula A.II and Harley 2253, Ritson requested twenty-three manuscripts, all returned shortly after, as he familiarized himself with the contents of the collections. Of those twenty-three, only seven were ever consulted again. These include several manuscripts containing Middle English verse, although none were as thoroughly studied as Harley 2253 and Caligula A.II. From his earliest periods in the British Museum, Ritson began to identify the

manuscripts most relevant to a study of Middle English verse, laying the foundations for publications that were not completed for several decades.

In his use of the manuscript collections, Ritson can be compared to Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín, perhaps the best studied user of the manuscript collections of the British Museum during this period. Thorkelín published the first edition of *Beowulf* in 1815, building upon a trip to Britain in the 1780s. *Beowulf* survives in a single manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.XV. As this manuscript was damaged in the fire at Ashburnham house in 1731, the edges of the pages are extremely brittle, and they deteriorated between the time when Thorkelín consulted them in the 1780s and made two transcripts, and stabilization of the manuscript in the 1830s. As a result, thousands of letters survive only in the transcripts made by Thorkelín, and his work cannot be entirely bypassed. The facsimile produced by the Early English Text Society in 1882, edited by Julius Zupitza, incorporated the evidence of the Thorkelín transcripts into the transliteration, and in the century since scholars have relied heavily on Zupitza. The transcripts themselves were reproduced in facsimile by Kemp Malone in 1951, further cementing their importance to textual scholarship. It was thus necessary for scholars working on *Beowulf* to establish the reliability of the transcripts as a textual witness, and to understand the process through which they were created. In *The Thorkelín Transcripts of Beowulf* (1986), Kevin S. Kiernan collates the transcripts with the manuscript text and with each other, drawing on archival records to establish how Thorkelín made his trip to the British Museum and how he conducted his research once he arrived, offering an unparalleled examination of one scholar's use of the Museum.

Thorkelín's requests in the reading room follow a similar pattern to Ritson's, with brief examinations of many manuscripts followed by more extensive research once items of interest had been identified. Before he arrived in England, Thorkelín used the only catalogue available to him, Thomas Smith's *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Cottonianae*, published in 1696, which entirely failed to mention *Beowulf*, to compile a list of manuscripts to examine (Kiernan 5). After arriving in London, the list was supplemented by Wanley's 1705 catalogue of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, and annotated as he began to examine manuscripts, with entries marked to return to later (6). On the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, 1789, Thorkelín requested Vitellius

A.XIII, XV, XVII, and XX, presumably made his notes, returned all four on the same day, and then requested four more manuscripts (7-8). In the absence of adequate catalogues, it was necessary to familiarize himself with the contents of the collection before devoting more attention to specific texts.

When Ritson arrived in London, catalogues were limited, often, as Thorkelin found, consisting of works compiled before the foundation of the Museum, when the founding collections were still privately owned. Work was underway to produce more accurate catalogues. Upon the purchase of the Harley collection at the time of the foundation, the catalogue begun in 1708 by Humphrey Wanley was completed by David Casely, William Hocker and Charles Morton, and published 'by order of the Trustees' in 1759. This was extremely uneven, and a new and revised catalogue was finally published in four volumes between 1808 and 1812. This remains the only complete catalogue to date. A complete catalogue of the Cotton manuscripts did not appear until 1802, although Samuel Hooper had edited and published a catalogue arranged by subject from Thomas Astle's notes in 1777, and manuscript catalogues of the Sloane and Birch manuscripts were available in the Reading Room (Harris 406). Samuel Ayscough's catalogue of the Sloane, Birch and Additional Manuscripts was published in 1782 (Harris 406). Ayscough is an even more frequent presence in the 'Register' than Ritson during these years, as he worked on various catalogues. The 'Register' records requests made by Ritson citing Ayscough's catalogue beginning in 1800.

Thorkelín's trip to Britain highlights the importance of transcripts to the study and publication of medieval texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although in hindsight his *Beowulf* edition of 1815 was the chief product of his trip, the immediate product was a wealth of transcripts to be carried back to Denmark, possibly to be used as the basis for an edition, but often simply as copies in their own right. To establish their status as textual witnesses, Keirnan needed to determine how they had been produced, establishing that Thorkelín A was made by 'a hired copyist ignorant of Old English and of insular script', and is more reliable than Thorkelín B, made by Thorkelín himself, as A's mistakes, though frequent, follow established patterns, while B 'is not an objective copy of the manuscript, but an edition-in-progress' (97). Thorkelín's transcripts followed a relatively simple path, providing

copies in Denmark of unique manuscripts held in the British Museum. An examination of Ritson's practice demonstrates a more complex dynamic, in which transcripts could circulate as gifts within collaborative networks.

Moreover, the Keirnan's study of Thorkelín and his edition reveals the relationship between the circumstances which made Thorkelín's work possible and the edition he eventually produced. Thorkelín's trip to Britain was a result of his continuing drive for advancement and patronage within Denmark. In 1784, impressed by his credentials, Christian VII promised him the post of National Archivist, when it should become vacant (2). As the current archivist, Christian Eberhard Voss, was still alive, Thorkelín sought funding for a research trip, to comb the libraries of Britain for sources of medieval Danish history, on the model of a trip made a previous national archivist, Jakob Langebek (2). Thorkelín received the funds he had requested, and had his grant renewed, allowing him to stay abroad until 1791, when Voss died (3). Thorkelín received funding to find a Danish text, and so presented what he found as *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul. III & IV Poema Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica* – Of Events Concerning the Danes in the Third and Fourth Centuries. A Danish Poem in the Anglo-Saxon Dialect. Twenty-first century scholarship has not been kind to Thorkelín, with Magnús Fjalldal identifying him as 'essentially a fraud as a scholar' who advanced 'through ingratiation rather than scholarly achievement' (321). Although Thorkelín's commitment to a nationalist interpretation is particularly blatant, it was hardly unique.

As Jeop Leerssen argues in 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', the 'rediscovery of the early medieval vernacular roots and rootedness of the various European languages and literatures' in the Romantic period 'revolutionized the European self-image and historical consciousness' (221). One crucial aspect of this 'rediscovery' was the identification and publication of medieval texts. As Leerssen reminds us, the discovery of lost manuscripts was both a literary cliché and an actual occurrence: 'Most medieval literary material, we should realize, had been forgotten, half forgotten, or disregarded by the late eighteenth-century, but between 1780 and 1840 much came to light' (226). Although Leerssen focuses on the texts which would be interpreted as 'national epics' – *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Kalevala* – similar patterns are

discernible in the ‘discovery’ of more marginal medieval texts. Across Europe, changes in the location and accessibility of manuscripts influenced the study and publication of the texts they contained:

The discoveries of old manuscripts almost invariably took place as their repositories were shifted from the private to the public domain. Until the late eighteenth century, antiquarianism (like that of Thomas Warton, Richard Hurd, and Bishop Thomas Percy) had been based on the private ownership of old manuscripts or on access to privately owned collections and involving private contacts between individual scholars....In contrast, the discoveries of the Romantic period occurred when scholars were sent on officially sanctioned missions to retrieve manuscripts or when archives and libraries were placed under new, public management and their contents professionally reinventoried. (227)

The sources available to Ritson, and the ways in which he used those sources, provide a striking example of the importance of this trend to the study and publication of early English literature at the end of the eighteenth century. The publically available collections were particularly important to Ritson, as he lacked the financial resources to ground his research in a privately owned collection, although he could sometimes gain access to those of others.

Although Ritson lacked institutional support, the vast majority of Ritson’s literary research would have been impossible without access to the British Museum. When the Museum was opened in 1759, the three founding collections of Cotton (manuscripts), Harley (manuscripts), Sloane (printed books and manuscripts) were supplemented by the collection of Major Arthur Edwards and the Royal collection (Harris 2). The period between the foundation of the Museum and Joseph Planta’s ascension to Principal Librarian has received relatively little attention in the histories of the library of the British Museum. In his *A History of the British Museum Library*, Harris devotes only 28 pages to the eighteenth century. Spevack, noting this, attributes the paucity of information to the limited importance of the Museum during this period (422). As impressive as the foundation collections were, funds for purchases were limited, although there were some significant donations (Harris 17-

23). Much of the limited budget and man-power was spent on binding and cataloguing the existing collections. Spevack argues that it was ‘not so much a library as a collection of collections, an assemblage of books and manuscripts, a succession of gifts, bequests and purchases, without much regard to cohesion or unity’, of little interest to the ‘average citizen’, who would be discouraged by the contents of the collections, as well as ‘the restrictions on admission, the discomfort of the appointments and the tediousness of the service’ (424-25). However, while the leaders of the Museum were less dynamic than they would be in the nineteenth century, the availability of the founding collections to scholars had a clear impact on the study of early English literature during this period. Ritson’s extensive publications are testament not only to his own idiosyncratic drive, but to the resources available to him.

When the Museum opened, staff included a Principal Librarian, three Under Librarians (for the three departments of ‘Natural and Artificial Productions’, manuscripts, and printed books), three Assistant Librarians, and the Keeper of the Reading Room (as well as porters, messengers, housemaids and watchmen), an arrangement which was not changed until 1800 (Harris 12). When Ritson first visited the Museum, Charles Morton had recently become Principle Librarian in 1776, and he remained in this post until Planta replaced him in 1799 (Harris 1998 12). Edward Millar attributes the limited progress during this period to both the financial constraints and the failures of Morton’s character, describing him as ‘a man of sedentary habits, extremely idle, disposed to let things run on from day to day and rarely to show the slightest initiative’, under whose leadership ‘all was wrapped in a sleepy torpor and it needed the energy and skill of younger men to bring the Museum more in line with the radical spirit of the coming century’ (83, 84). Morton was reprimanded by the Trustees for his absences from the Museum, notably when he failed to greet the King, the Prince of Wales and Prince Frederick when they visited the troops stationed at the Museum during the Gordon Riots (Harris 13). Planta was Under Librarian of the Department of Manuscripts, while Samuel Harper cared for the Department of Printed Books (Harris 13). Harris describes Harper as ‘an assiduous rather than an inspiring figure’, who combined his duties at the Museum with his service as the chaplain of the Foundling Hospital, the only incident of note

during his long tenure being the time a drunken porter struck him over the head (13). The Keeper of the Reading Rooms was the Rev. Richard Penneck (9).

The original Reading Room (in the basement of Montagu House) had been replaced in 1774 by two rooms on the ground floor (it had been damp, cramped, and lined with cases of stuffed birds) (Miller 88). Dry rot had been discovered in 1771, and Penneck, who suffered from gout, claimed that his health suffered from the damp, explaining his frequent absences (Harris 9). Spevack notes that, in the eighteenth century, Montagu House's location in Bloomsbury would have been difficult to access from other areas of London, although it was less than mile from Ritson's rooms in Gray's Inn (423). Readers required a ticket, and the numbers in the Reading Room were always small, restricted by both the size of the room and the nature of the collections (425). From the records of the 'Register', Ritson must have been a frequent fixture of the rooms.

### **Typographical Antiquities**

In addition to his work on the manuscript collections, Ritson began a detailed study of early printed material during this period. If a record of the use of the printed collections of the British Museum was kept, I have not been able to locate it. However, Ritson's unfinished 'Catalogue of Romances', a bibliographical work recording every printed romance in French, Italian, Spanish, and English, provides a complex record of the research that Ritson undertook into early printed materials and his efforts to organize and interpret the material that he studied. Like the 'Register', Ritson's 'Catalogue' demonstrates the extraordinary breadth of his research, both in the British Museum and elsewhere. Moreover, Ritson's early attempts to organize his research reveals the ways in which he applied an antiquarian sensibility to early literary texts, with significant and influential results.

Ritson likely began the work around 1780. In 1782 he had printed a sample of the proposed work, with a title page – '*Fabularum Romanensium Bibliotheca*' – and two sample entries. However, the work continued to grow, with continual layers of revisions and additions until Ritson's death. As such, it provides a fascinating, though messy, record of Ritson's research. The three manuscripts, of French, Italian

and Spanish, and English romances are now held in the British Museum, ADD MSS 10283-85.

The third volume, of English romances, is an ambitious bibliography of all romances, very broadly defined, printed before 1660. The earliest pages are in the clearest, most careful hand, and seem to be a fair copy. The pages are carefully ruled, and each entry includes the full title and colophon, printer, date, size and type. This is followed by an indented description of any dedication or other paratextual material, sometimes a description of the contents, and the present location of any known copies. In some cases, there are lengthy extracts from prefaces or translator's notes, usually those describing the composition, printing, or publishing of the work. Other entries, likely composed later, follow the lay-out in a smaller and less careful hand, often demonstrating false starts and corrections. Several layers of corrections and additions are visible. For example, at some point after the majority of the fair pages were written, Ritson decided that only proper names should be capitalized, and meticulously went through the existing entries, bringing them into conformity with this plan.<sup>12</sup> Some entries have been carefully brought into line with Ritson's preferred mode of spelling, others, likely the latest, were originally composed in that form. The records of the locations of copies were updated, reflecting the death of private collectors and the dispersal of their collections, as well as the transformation of the King's Library into the National Library in the aftermath of the revolution in Paris.

Bronson uses the 'Catalogue' to trace Ritson's growing dissatisfaction with Warton's work (320-321). Where a text has been mentioned by Warton, Ritson usually includes that information in his entry, especially when Warton is incorrect or inconsistent. Ritson seems to have envisioned a deeply intertextual work, a catalogue that accurately recorded early texts, their location, and the scholarship on them. However, with the exception of those works that intersected with the study of

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<sup>12</sup> A note in the upper left hand corner of fol. 26 reads 'No capitals but proper names'. The manuscript has been numbered twice, and most folios bear two numbers in the upper right corner (although some have only one, and a few have three). One, in ink, was added when the manuscript was nearly, but not entirely in its present form, the other, in pencil, was added after the manuscript was acquired by the British Museum. The latter has been used here.



Chaucer or Shakespeare, this consisted almost entirely of the unsatisfactory work of Warton and Percy. Some mentions of Warton and Percy are entirely neutral: if a reader wants more information on a particular text, Warton and Percy's publications might be the only places where it could be found. Most, however, are typically confrontational.

However, there is one other work on which Ritson draws: Joseph Ames's *Typographical Antiquities* (1749). Ames's work is primarily bibliographical, organized by printer. It is concerned with printed works as material objects that provide evidence of the evolution of print as an art and a technology. As specific physical objects, Ames provides the locations of the texts he lists, which consist primarily of private collections, including that of Ames himself. As Ritson was compiling his 'Catalogue', William Herbert's revised edition of Ames's work was being published, the three volumes appearing in 1785, 1786 and 1790. The publication of each volume can be traced in a layer of revisions to Ritson's 'Catalogue'. Ritson takes the format of his entries from Ames, and in some cases, most notably the description of the lost Caxton edition of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, quotes extensively from his work. However, Ritson combines the study of 'typographical antiquities' with a more literary approach, extracting literary texts, organizing them by genre, and attempting to establish relationships between them.

Despite its sprawling nature, the 'Catalogue' represents an attempt to place these materials in some kind of order. Rough grouping of similar texts is evident. Ritson's inclusion of French, Italian, and Spanish texts is not merely a result of his tastes. As Ritson records, a significant portion of the early modern fiction that Ritson studied was, or purported to be, a translation from these languages. Ritson seems to have envisioned three heavily cross-referenced volumes, as he worked to identify corresponding texts across languages. In its broad chronological remit, the 'Catalogue' emphasizes continuity, connecting different versions of texts, or similar kinds of texts, across time and space.

Some organization is provided by dividing the romances by topic. After an incomplete table of contents the third volume begins with 'English Romances. Romances of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and Arthur of Little Britain' (3). The first entry is a description of Caxton's edition of Malory's *Le Morte*

*d'Arthur*, taken from Ames's *Typographical Antiquities* (as no copies of Caxton's edition were known to exist at that time). He mentions Roger Ascham's condemnation of the work (a small slip of paper has been added later with the quotation) and Warton's remarks in the *Observations*. He provides, again taken from Ames, the table of contents and a paraphrase of Caxton's preface. Upon Caxton's description of the discovery and translation of Arthur's body to Glastonbury recorded in the *Polychronicon*, Ritson provides another note with more information on Trevisa's translation of Higden's work, observes that Gerald of Wales left an eyewitness account of the ceremony, and that Warton 'has made it the subject of a very beautiful ode' (10). He concludes with the information that although 'a copy of this edition was in lord Oxfords Library...what became of it does not appear' (13). The next entry is the edition of the same text by Wynkeyn de Worde, again with extensive bibliographical notes, some of which, possibly because they were not available when the entry was first written, are inserted on the verso. A copy of this edition can be located, 'In the Pepsyan Library' (12). There are entries for the edition of Thomas East (1585), a copy in 'the Publick Library, Cambridge', and the Stansby edition of 1634. The latter, in the final version of heavily edited description, could be found 'In Scion-college library; and among Mr John Baynes's books in the editor's possession' (15).

After a discussion of Warton's remarks in the *History of English Poetry*, the catalogue moves on to romances relating to Gawain, and then to increasingly tenuous Arthurian material, and then to Merlin's prophesies (19). Arthur is followed by Charlemagne. Many of these are English translations of identifiable French and Italian originals, and Ritson refers readers to the other volumes of his 'Catalogue'. For example, the entry for John Harington's translation of 'Orlando Furioso' provides Ritson with an opportunity to discuss subsequent editions and translations, and to recommend Harington's translation over more recent productions.

Other headings include 'Romancees of Amadis, Belianis, The knight of the sun, The Palmerins, and don Quixote' (27), 'Ancient Metrical Romances' (48), 'Romances of Ancient English Heroes, with Tales and Stories of divers other of our old worthies both real & imaginary' (51), 'Miscellaneous Romances' (54), 'Romances of Jason, Troy, Hector, Alexander, Jerusalem & Godfrey of Bulloigne'

(193), ‘Pastoral Romances’ (207), and ‘Allegorical, Pious, Mystical, Philosophical and Moral Romances’ (244). Ritson’s experimentation with organization suggests different ways to read well-known texts. For example, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* is presented as the most significant in the class of ‘Pastoral Romances’ (207), linked to similar texts in other languages, attempts at modernization, continuations, and imitations, with an examination of its publication history allowing Ritson to protest that what once had been ‘a most celebrated and popular Romance....once universally read & admired, was the delight of a Court, and may be considered as the school for refined sentiment, elegant language and polite manners of the sixteenth century has been pronounced, by the elegant biographer of our Royal and Noble Authours [Walpole] “a tedious, lamentable, pedantic, pastoral romance”’ (207).<sup>13</sup>

In his quest to identify the location of existing copies, Ritson provides a window into the distribution of early printed material in this period, or at least that portion accessible to him. The British Museum, or simply ‘The Museum’, is frequently identified, as are the University collections. The library of Scion College seems have amassed a significant collection of early English printed material. Privately assembled collections that had recently been donated to the public libraries, especially the Garrick collection of old plays in the British Museum, and the closely related Capell collection in Trinity College Cambridge, provided much useful material. However, private collections are prominent, far more prominent than they are in Ritson’s selection of authorities for his collections, suggesting a deliberate choice on his part. Johnston identifies ‘the basis for the catalogue’ as ‘the library of the Rev. Thomas Croft, Chancellor of Peterborough, a collection rich in French manuscripts’ (132). Santini follows Johnston’s description. However, this is true of the French romances, not the English.

In many cases, the private collections to which Ritson refers, and to which he had some degree of access, were those of other scholars with whom he had a friendly

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<sup>13</sup> Ritson’s copy of Horace Walpole’s *Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* (1758) is now held in the British Library (125.b.1.2). Like many of Ritson’s books, it is interleaved with his notes, in which he offers corrections and additions.

relationship. Dr Farmer's collections feature heavily, although most of the descriptions of copies in his possession have been struck out, possibly after the sale and dispersal of his library following his death in 1797. Steevens is mentioned frequently, and Reed occasionally. The manuscript is heavily annotated in red ink, in the distinctive hand of Francis Douce. Some of these annotations are extensive, others consist only of a single 'D' next to an entry. Often these involve items in Douce's collections. Bronson notes that Douce's annotations could have been entered after Ritson's death. However, a close examination reveals several entries in which the contents of Douce's notes have been added to the entries in Ritson's hand, in a visible demonstration of collaboration.

The major influence on this catalogue was John Baynes. Born in Yorkshire in 1758, Baynes had a distinguished career at Cambridge, winning prizes for his work philosophy and classics, and became a fellow of Trinity College in 1779 (Cannon). He entered Gray's Inn in 1777, where he presumably met Ritson. He became involved in the Rowley controversy, and assisted Ritson in his prefatory essay to *A Select Collection of English Songs*, using the classical education that Ritson lacked to provide him with translations from Greek (Bronson 71,72,83). Baynes died at the age of 29 in 1787, leaving Ritson his collection of English Romances (Bronson 130). In 1788, Ritson wrote to Harrison asking him to look over the Latin inscription that he had composed for the bookcase to hold Baynes's bequest (130). Bronson observes that it would likely be possible to reconstruct 'a tolerably complete list of the titles' from the Catalogue (130). Many of the entries which originally read 'in the possession of Mr. Baynes' were amended to read 'in Baynes's Romances in the editour's possession'.

Ritson's use of Ames and Herbert's *Typographical Antiquities* places him within a decidedly antiquarian tradition. Many of Ritson's most significant contributions to the study of early English literature are the result of the combination of the resources available to him in public and private collections and his commitment to applying antiquarian sensibilities to literary texts. Through the records of his early research, the confluence of these different elements can be traced. From his arrival in London, Ritson began to lay the foundation for his later publications, identifying significant manuscript and print sources for a study of early

English literature. However, Ritson's background before his move to London was in non-literary antiquarian research, which he continued to pursue. Much of Ritson's later sensibilities can be traced to his early training.

While the study of early English literature was only beginning to develop, textual antiquarian work had a long history in England. As Rosemary Sweet has shown, the expectations and standards of antiquarian writing developed in the religious and political controversies of the second half of the seventeenth century, as 'Empiricism was the basis of historical truth and historical truth was the means by which orthodoxy was maintained and challenged. Religious histories of the late seventeenth century were replete with evidence cited from manuscripts and other authorities' (1-2). Extensive notes might disrupt narrative, but they also provided an assurance that work which had political and religious implications could be verified (6). For example, the work of the non-juror Thomas Hearne on medieval manuscripts was closely tied to his politics, yet although later antiquaries looked down on him for his dry and laborious style, 'they had to acknowledge, however grudgingly, that his insistence upon accuracy in reproducing the originals was the only defence against the penetrating criticisms of the sceptics' (15). Antiquarian research shared with natural history 'the Baconian assumption that antiquities were the fragments of the historical shipwreck to time, and that if sufficient were collected some progress could be made towards recovering the shape of that wreck' and a suspicion of 'excessive speculation and theorisation', preferring 'reporting and describing' (8, 13). Both disciplines thus required 'Proper referencing and citation', the careful construction of an argument fully supported by quotations, references and footnotes (13).

Local histories played a key role in this antiquarian tradition. As Sweet argues, 'the geographical unit within which the gentleman antiquary was most likely to work and with which he would identify himself was the county history', a structure which asserted 'the legitimacy of the place of the landed gentry in society' (36). The local history which Ritson undertook, and into which he was later incorporated, was largely concerned with the county and the history of the ecclesiastical institutions that retained contemporary influence. As Sweet notes, clergymen were often antiquaries, not merely because they had the necessary learning and leisure, but because antiquarian research could support the church's

claims as a landowner, and allow them to collect the tithes to which they were entitled (56). This was thus a generally conservative undertaking, and one in which Ritson, even at this early stage, fit uncomfortably.<sup>14</sup>

Before his move to London, Ritson had already made several significant contacts, developing friendships with other local antiquaries. These included George Allan, whose private fortune allowed him to set up a private press to print antiquarian works, and Robert Harrison, a local natural philosopher, linguist, and eccentric (Bronson 45). Although Ritson is best known for his attacks on established writers, and for falling-out with several of his collaborators during the final years of his life, the kind of work he undertook was a social activity, dependent upon collaborative networks, and for most of his life Ritson successfully established and maintained productive friendships. He relied on these relationships for favours, such as transcripts and collations, as well as introductions to scholars, librarians, collectors, booksellers and publishers. In 1775, Ritson wrote to Allan, praising his work on local history, and observing that

as your Collection of Materials equals, I doubt not, the grandeur of your design, you will most probably have several Papers relative to the History and Antiquities of Stockton. If it be so, and you would be pleased to permit me to inspect them, either at Darlington or here, I shall ever retain a grateful sense of the favour. In return, if my service in procuring you any information you may want, in this place or its neighbourhood, would be worth your acceptance, I shall with the greatest pleasure receive your commands on the occasion.

(Bronson 46-47).

At the age of twenty-two, Ritson was already navigating the often delicate networks of exchange – introducing himself deferentially, asking for favours and offering his own services in return. When he moved to London, Allan provided him with an introduction to the librarian of the British Museum, and Ritson continued to send Allan information (Bronson 47). Ritson drew on the established traditions of

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<sup>14</sup> One of Ritson's juvenile attempts at poetry, *My Cousin's Tale*, has some satirical touches at the expense of these elements of antiquarian research. See Bronson 15-21.

antiquarian research as a social practice. Sweet notes that although ‘Antiquarianism was not class neutral...it did provide a language within which people from very different backgrounds could communicate and exchange information’ (60). Collaboration across disparities in social background could require ‘careful negotiation’, but was possible, particularly when carried out through correspondence (60). Antiquaries saw themselves as part of ‘Republic of Letters’, which ‘gave them a sense of identity and belonging which transcended differences of geography and social background and provided a context for their own endeavours, as a contribution to a wider good’ (61). This collaboration was essential:

It was this flourishing network of exchange and correspondence, as much as the Society of Antiquaries itself, which sustained the antiquarian enterprise. It facilitated the study of antiquities by encouraging the free exchange of artefacts, manuscripts and books, the performance of services (such as making transcriptions, identifying references) and the opportunity to exercise patronage by which the recipient was assisted and the credit and reputation of the patron was enhanced. But to work effectively it had to be based upon the assumption of moral integrity on both sides and a shared view that all those involved were gentlemen, or would at least observe a gentlemanly code, since the fundamental principles of the network were those of exchange and reciprocity of obligation (61).

Before he left Stockton, Ritson was already establishing these kinds of relationships with local antiquaries such as Allan and Harrison. Once in London, he began to make contact with a wider circle of literary antiquarians, especially those involved in Shakespearean research, such as Steevens, Reed and Farmer, allowing him to draw upon their collections for his ‘Catalogue of Romances’.

Ritson continued his interest in local antiquarian history, and continued to participate in the antiquarian networks that he had joined before his move to London. In February of 1780, he wrote to George Allan to apologize for his lack of communication, explaining:

My attendance at the Museum has been so interrupted and imperfect, that I have not had the good fortune to discover any thing relating to

the county of Durham curious enough to communicate to you. If you will please to point out any thing there which may be of use to you, I shall be happy to render you every little service in my power.

I observe an excellent pedigree of the Conyerses of Sockburne in one of the Harleian MSS. (No. 6070) if you be not already provided with it. I had copied the inclosed charter from the same article, but it seems scarcely worth the sending. (*Letters* 6)

Ritson's imperfect attendance can be confirmed by the Register, which lists only one request that month, although this was a lengthy examination of Caligula.A.II. Some of Ritson's absence from the Museum in the previous year can be explained by his trip to Oxford, the results of which he relays to Allan (an absence later in the year can be explained by the disruption of the Gordon Riots, although Ritson was back in the Reading Room before the troops had left their tents in the garden).

In addition to his frequent attendance at the Museum, Ritson spent his early years in London establishing himself professionally. Asked to identify the author of the attack on Warton, both Steevens and Lort placed him in Gray's Inn, Steevens describing him as 'bred to the law' and 'one of Mr Masterman the Conveyancer's clerks'. After Ritson's death Godwin located him first as a conveyancer and a legal antiquarian, while Brewster and Surtees both emphasised his early legal training in Stockton. Malone dismissed him as a 'petty attorney and draftsman'. As with his antiquarian work, Ritson's professional life depended upon recommendations and personal connections. At the age of seventeen, he was indentured to the solicitor John Stapylton Raisbeck (Bronson 41). A few years later, his articles were transferred to Ralph Bradley, a prominent local lawyer who was, according to Brewster, 'principally eminent in that branch of the law which is called CONVEYANCING' (360). Conveyancing was a branch of the law particularly suited to antiquarian study, concerned with the investigation of titles to land. On a practical level, it required Ritson to develop skills in archival research and a familiarity with archaic language and scripts. Many years later, Scott identifies conveyancing as the field most suited to his own antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck. As the second son, Oldbuck, rejects the 'substantial mercantile concern' of his maternal relations:



He was then put apprentice to the profession of a writer, or attorney, in which he profited so far, that he made himself master of the whole forms of feudal investitures, and showed such pleasure in reconciling their incongruities, and tracing their origin, that his master had great hope he could one day be an able conveyancer. But he halted upon the threshold, and, though he acquired some knowledge of the origin and system of law of his country, he could never be persuaded to apply it to lucrative and practical purposes. It was not from any inconsiderate neglect of the advantages attending the possession of money that he thus deceived the hopes of his master. “Were he thoughtless or light-headed, or rei suae prodigus,” said his instructor, “I would know what to make of him. But he never pays away a shilling without looking anxiously after the change, makes his sixpence go farther than another lad’s half-crown, and will ponder over an old black-letter copy of the Acts of Parliament for days, rather than go to the golf or the change-house; and yet he will not bestow one of these days on a little business of routine, that would put twenty shillings in his pocket – a strange mixture of frugality and industry, and negligent indolence – I don’t know what to make of him.” (14-15)

Jonathan Oldbuck’s elder brother dies of excessive hunting and drinking and so he never has to rely on his professional training. Ritson was obliged to follow a different path.

In 1784 Ritson was able to secure the office of Bailiff of the Liberty of the Savoy. Although this office brought him more work and less money than he had hoped, it brought him a steady income (Bronson 122-3). The product of the gradual accumulation of legal rights since the thirteenth century, a thin slice of London between the Thames and the Strand was legally a part of the Duchy of Lancaster, governed by a Court Leet, independent of the rest of London (127). In addition to his literary antiquarian works, Ritson compiled and published a number of legal antiquarian works, many relating to this position, including *Sketch of the Authority of the Burgesses of the Savoy* (1786), *Digest of the Proceedings of the Court Leet* (1789), *The Office of Constable* (1791), *Jurisdiction of the Court-Leet* (1791),

*Critical Observations on A Deed* (1804) and *The Office of Bailiff of A Liberty* (1811). These works are presented as both immediately relevant to the present, and deeply antiquarian. For example, the preface to the *Office of Constable* identifies constables themselves as potential readers, declaring ‘If the following pages prove at all instrumental toward making a single constable more active, confident, and secure in the discharge of such powers and duties of his office as are any way beneficial to society, (for the less he attends to the others the better,) the compiler will have reason to flatter himself, that his efforts, though humble, have not been useless’ (6). To establish the immediately relevant nature of the office of constable, Ritson begins with tracing the etymology of the term, through the earliest uses in Norman law, drawing on the manuscript collections of the British Museum. The *Office of Bailiff of a Liberty* was never published during Ritson’s lifetime, as publication was continually deferred so that more material could be gathered, and it begins the declaration that ‘The subject of the following digest, is not, as may be hastily imagined, a matter of mere curiosity or antiquarian research. The officer of whom it treats exercises his function in many parts of the kingdom, in the fullest extent, at this day” (xv). Ritson conducted research into royal charters of the thirteenth century, building a case arguing for rights in the present. As Sweet demonstrates there was a strong tradition in England of legal antiquarian work, as ‘Manuscripts and charters were the surest proof of history and numerous antiquaries devoted themselves to collecting and transcribing charters and other documents generated by the administrative and ecclesiastical institutions of the state’ (15). Many of the manuscript collections which Ritson consulted, although they contained literary works, were formed to provide the necessary foundations for a legal system built upon precedent. In his legal antiquarian works, Ritson presented a persona not unlike that developed in his literary works: he is someone who has made an exhaustive study of all relevant material, and can be counted upon for his accuracy and discernment in compiling his material. However, while the importance of this kind of expertise was recognized for legal works (Ritson’s legal works were generally well received) its application to literary works was less straightforward.

Yet Ritson was in many ways sceptical about the assumption of continuity on which so much in his work depended. In 1778 he published a broadside entitled ‘The

Descent of the Crown of England', consisting of a preface and three tables listing the succession from Edgar I, from William the Conqueror, and from Edmund Ironside (Bronson 57). This broadside was reprinted in 1783, with some excisions, and only one copy of each edition is known to exist, both now in the Folger Shakespeare Library. This work has been used as evidence of Ritson's early Jacobite sympathies, as he uses the note upon William III to condemn 'A proceeding as replete with treachery, inhumanity, and injustice, as ever disgraced the annals of a civilized country' (57). After Ritson's death, Godwin remarked that, 'Having amply studied the laws and constitution of his country, he was on principle an enemy to the succession of the house of Hanover; and, without any prejudices of education to urge him, became a Jacobite from reasoning, at a time when the race of Jacobites, by descent, was nearly extinct in this country – This unfortunate singularity he however discarded about the period of the French revolution, and till his death remained firmly attached to the principles of republicanism' (376). As Bronson notes, 'Ritson's Jacobitism was not so symptomatic of a devotion to royalty in its abstract principle as of a distaste for the present state of affairs...having found your present sovereign a usurper, you can later give rein to your democratic inclinations without compunction' (59). Ritson uses his characterisation of the 'Glorious Revolution' to make a historiographical claim, one which complicates the antiquarian tradition in which he worked:

we arrive at the Revolution, when (as the word imports) the Constitution appears to have suffered so violent and total a Change, that the very nature of things should seem to have been perverted along with it, and reduced to the original Chaos. The shock, like that of an earthquake, has appalled us so, we have not yet recovered the use of our reason; and possibly never may. In viewing this transaction, we dare not examine into its causes and effects as we do with regard to most other human events: – We are not even suffered to look upon it but through the deceitful glass of party prejudice. – The ever amiable and adorable Goddess Truth is abandoned by the historian as an infectious hag: – 3,00 are 3,000000: – and our senses nothing but deception. In short, this affair must be considered as a monstrous

birth, which, though we know it has existed, it does not so well  
become us to speak of, much less to argue upon (58)

The study of the past ought to provide a firm foundation of precedent for the present. Yet when Ritson looks to the ‘Descent of the Crown’, he finds disruption rather than continuity. The succession from William the Conqueror receives the parenthetical aside ‘supposing a good Right in him by Conquest’, while Ritson applies the term ‘usurper’ unsparingly, to Edward the Confessor, Harold II, Henry I, Stephen, John, Henry III, Edward III, Henry IV, V, and VI, and Richard III (57). Ritson is at the same time committed to the belief that histories with a direct relevance to the present can be established, and deeply sceptical about the attempts to do so. Precisely because the past is relevant to the present, it cannot be approached honestly.

Ritson was able to apply his antiquarian sensibilities to literary texts with significant results. Combined with his own research in the British Museum, Ritson uses this antiquarian background to rebuke Warton in his *Observations* for his careless and misleading use of his sources. A note on Warton’s description of printed romances in his third volume corrects Warton’s description of the transmission of specific romances from manuscript to print, providing an application of the research recorded in his ‘Catalogue’. Ritson identifies an instance when Warton reproduced a slight error ‘implicitly following Ames, but, according to your constant practice, concealing the name of your informant’ (36). Warton had simply copied information from Ames’s work, making assumptions about the connection between the printed *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, *Guy Earl of Warwick*, and *Syr Bevyys of Southampton* and the earlier manuscript versions of these romances, and then built an argument on the basis of those assumptions. Ritson had begun to identify and study the different manuscript and print versions, tracking the relationships between them.

He applied the same methodology to *Piers Plowman*, with significant results. Although Ritson chose to use the earliest printed version for the extract included in his *English Anthology*, he studied and compared several manuscript sources, attempting to disentangle their complicated relationships to one another. Much like his use of the manuscripts containing romances, he identifies and begins to study many of the manuscripts containing copies of *Piers Plowman* during his early years in the British Museum, requesting at least three of the surviving copies during the

summer of 1777. In the 'Catalogue of Romances' he adds to a description of the printed editions the observation that:

The differences as well between the printed copies on the one hand and most if not all the MSS. on the other, as between the MSS. themselves is very remarkable. Of the latter indeed there appears to be two sets, of which the one has scarcely 5 lines tog[ether] in common with the other' (247v)

Although Ritson never completed the 'Catalogue of Romances', he returned to the bibliographic form with one of his final works, the *Bibliographia Poetica* (1802). A much more straightforward work, the *Bibliographia Poetica* is a list of the nameable authors that Ritson was able to identify, with a record of their works, divided by century and then arranged alphabetically. In the entry for Langland, Ritson observes that 'Manuscript copys of this work are by no means uncommon in publick librarys' and divides them into 'two editions (as one may call them)' listing examples of each found in the British Museum and other institutional collections, each list concluding 'and others' (28-29). Ritson concludes that:

it appears highly probable that the author had revised his original work, and given, as it were, a new edition; and it may be possible for a good judge of ancient poetry, possessed of a sufficient stock of critical acumen, to determine which was the first, and which the second. (30)

This observation has earned Ritson a central role in the history of Langland studies, recognized by scholars such as George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson. Ritson's contributions to Langland scholarship, and twentieth-century reactions to Ritson, are examined extensively in Charlotte Brewer's *Editing Piers Plowman* (1996) and Lawrence Warner's *The Myth of Piers Plowman: Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (2014), in the context of Warner's challenges to twentieth-century orthodoxy. Ritson's breakthrough would not have been possible without the possibility of comparing a large number of manuscripts, and the willingness to do so.

In the context of the Rowley controversy, Warton had claimed an authority to determine the date of a composition on the grounds of taste. In the *Observations*, Ritson demonstrates his own expertise, derived from a thorough study of early

English manuscript and print sources, an antiquarian expertise built upon a close study of the linguistic and material features of his texts. This is most explicit in a note on Warton's description of the 'Tournament of Tottenham' in the third volume of his history:

"To some part of the reign of Henry the eighth I assign the Tournament of Tottenham... the substance of its phraseology, which I divest of its obvious innovations, is not altogether obsolete enough for a higher period. I am aware, that in a manuscript of the British Museum it is referred to the time of Henry the sixth. But that manuscript affords no positive indication of that date"

Such a shuffleing, nonsensical paragraph was, I firmly believe, never put together since the invention of letters. That which I do not, and which, I think, no one can, understand, I shall not meddle with. Here is an authentic MS. which not onely Mr. Tyrwhitt (and when I mention him I suppose I need not care if there be a hundred of a different opinion) but every other person who has seen it, is satisfied and convinced could not have been written later than the reign of Henry the sixth. Now you, Mr. Warton, who, to be sure, must be an incomparable judge of what you never saw, pronounce it near a century more modern, because, forsooth, it only *refers* the poem to that age (which it certainly does not) and gives no "positive indication" of such a date (which it certainly does). But if the book had been evidently written in Edward the seconds time, the same absurd plea would have served you. There is not one MS. out of a hundred that has any "positive indication" of the particular period in which it has been written; and yet people who are in the practice of inspecting and comparing MSS. of different ages, can assign to each its proper date, nearly as well as if they had found it in the book. But what is all this to you, who know nothing either of ancient writing or of ancient language. (31-32)

Like Caligula A.II and Harley 2253, Ritson had first requested the relevant manuscript (Harley 5396, which contains, in addition to medical and theological

works, a collection of Middle English verse) in October of 1776, and requested it several more times before the publication of the *Observations*. In addition to the authority derived from the careful consultation of individual texts, Ritson's years of intense study in British Museum and elsewhere gave him the necessary expertise in 'ancient writing' and 'ancient language' to accurately and authoritatively date texts. Ritson is here building upon an antiquarian model of textual scholarship, using Tyrwhitt's work on Chaucer to understand how such an approach could be applied to medieval English texts. Throughout Ritson's works, beginning with the *Observations*, he demonstrates considerable, and often unappreciated, skill in establishing the dates of early texts.

Between 1776 and 1782, Ritson undertook an extraordinary programme of research, one he would continue to pursue until his death. Through the combination of his antiquarian background and the material available to him in public and private collections, he was able to mount a challenge to the authority of Thomas Warton and Thomas Percy. Yet Ritson had yet to apply the knowledge that he had so painstakingly amassed. Despite the aggressive, adversarial, and antiquarian approach he adopted in the polemics, Ritson's first published collection was the *Select Collection of English Songs*, an elegant work for a general audience.





### Chapter 3: English Songs

William Godwin concludes the preface to his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803) with a reflection on his own, unwilling, period as a student of the British Museum:

Throughout this publication, care has been taken to make no reference to any book, which has not been actually consulted, and the reference verified by inspection. One circumstance has resulted from this, which it seems candid to explain. In the early part of the work, for about one hundred pages, the books referred to are few, and many references are given at second-hand from publications comparatively accessible or modern; afterward this defect no longer occurs. The cause of this is as follows. It was impossible for me to purchase all the books I had occasion to consult; and, reasoning upon general principles, I believed it could not be difficult in such a metropolis as London to obtain the loan of them. I accordingly made many efforts for that purpose; but my efforts were for the most part unsuccessful. Few of our public libraries suffer their books to be removed beyond the walls of their institution. And, for private collectors, I generally found that they did not see, in the illustrations of English history and English literature here proposed to be made, a sufficient motive to part with their treasures for a short time out of their own hands. After some interval therefore of fruitless experiments, it became necessary to form a peremptory resolution, and to yield to an assiduous and almost daily attendance at the British Museum. This has been productive of great loss of time and many disadvantages. No studious man can collate authorities and draw his inferences satisfactorily, except in his own chamber. No man can adequately judge what it is that may be necessary to his purpose, till after repeated essays and comparisons. Add to which, he who studies at home chooses his seasons of study, while he who resorts to a public library has them measured out to him by others. But, when animated with the hope of adding something to

the stock of general information or improvement, it is right that such obstacles should be regarded by us as unworthy of notice. (xv-xvii)<sup>15</sup>

Authority rests on direct consultation of his sources, and Godwin assures readers that he has done so. However, access to those sources is dependent upon ownership, and individual or institutional owners can impose practical limitations on the scholars who wish to consult their collections, requiring them to be present in specific rooms, at specific times. Godwin's research, like Ritson's, was only possible in London. Godwin presents himself as a biographer who functions simply as a conduit between his materials and his readers, happy to have 'led my readers, with however unconfirmed a speech and inadequate powers, to the different sources of information' and able to take pride in identifying materials unknown to Tyrwhitt: 'He has not in a single instance resorted to the national repositories in which our records are preserved. In this sort of labour I had been indefatigable; and I have many obligations to acknowledge to the politeness and liberality of the persons to whose custody these monuments are confided' (x, xii). While the owners and guardians of his materials could impose restrictions on his research, the publication of that research was further constrained by the demands of the public and the bookseller:

But, if I, enamoured of my subject, might have thought no number of pages or of volumes too much for its development, it was by no

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<sup>15</sup> While Godwin assured readers that he was not deterred, he did complain, in a letter to Joseph Planta:

But it is impossible for me to express, or for any person who has never been engaged in a work of patient & unintermitted investigation fully to conceive, the disadvantages that must attend an examination of authorities & documents in a public Reading Room. For this purpose passages must not only be read with a deep & concentrated attention, but the writer must also reason, weigh, & make inferences, as he reads. But a public Reading Room, however decorously managed conducted, must be attended with infinite distractions to such a writer a person so employed. The majority of the frequenters of such a room will always be persons who read more from a spirit of vague curiosity, & that they may spend their time agreeably to themselves, than from any other motive. It ought not to be, & it cannot be otherwise. The question to which I presume to call the attention of the officers or governors of the Museum is, what accommodation & facilities can be afforded to a person engaged in an elaborate work & in the highest degree public in its object, if it he should be in their opinion possess in any of tolerable degree the powers & qualifications which are necessary requisite for its due the execution of what he has undertaken? (*Letters of William Godwin* 2: 355).

I am indebted to Louise McCray for alerting me to Godwin's letter.

means impossible that purchasers and readers would think otherwise. My bookseller, who is professionally conversant with matters of this sort, assured me, that two volumes in quarto were as much as the public would allow the title of my book to authorise. It would be in vain to produce a work, whatever information it might comprise, which no one will purchase or will read; and I therefore submitted to his decision. (xiii)

This was the challenge faced by Ritson. Having undertaken an extraordinary programme of research, often in the Reading Rooms of the British Museum, how could he navigate the space between the library and the bookseller, transforming that research into works that might be purchased and read?

Decades earlier, Thomas Warton had found himself in the same position. In ‘The Origins of Warton’s *History of English Poetry*’, David Fairer explores the research and the decisions which provided the foundation for Warton’s work. Fairer demonstrates that Warton had begun to gather material for his ‘History’ much earlier than had been generally understood, in the years 1752-4 (40). Like Ritson, Warton began with a period of reading, in Warton’s case in the Bodleian Library. Fairer charts a gradual escalation: in 1750 Warton requested one item, in 1751 he requested two, in 1752 twelve, in 1753 seventy-one, and in 1754 forty-seven (41). He notes that in 1753, Warton accounted for one-ninth of the total requests for that year (41). Warton read all that he could find on literary history, poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and medieval literature (41). In addition, he explored the holdings of the Ashmolean Museum and began to assemble his own collection (42). Fairer finds in Warton’s notebooks and letters ‘a fascinating glimpse of Warton casting around for a project which would comprehend the material he was gathering from his reading of earlier English Poetry’ (45). In this formulation, his *Observations on the Faerie Queene* is the only project completed of a number of proposed plans. He considered an edition of Spenser, but his notes became too unwieldy to fit within that frame (46). He considered a selection of early modern poems ‘as thro’ the Injuries of Time have been forgotten, but deserve to be reviv’d’, selected for their poetic merit rather than historical importance (47, 49). He considered tracing the history of the pastoral tradition, or of the rise of allegory (51,

52). He composed drafts for 'Letters on Ancient Literature', but this project, like the others, was laid aside (52-53). As Fairer argues,

In these early years Warton seems to have flirted with virtually every possible format for exploiting his researches: editions, a critical anthology, a collection of essays, Letters, Anecdotes. But behind it all was a desire to trace the development of literature, whether as an 'Account of the Progress of Pastoral' or as an essay on 'The Rise & Progress of Allegoric Poetry in England'. During 1752-4 Thomas Warton was mapping out (albeit crudely) the history of English Poetry, and through exploring literary analogues and influences he was developing a sense of the time-scale of literary history. Whether he saw it as a story of 'rise' or 'decline', it is clear that at this time he understood it in terms of 'progress' – as an institution undergoing continuous change and development. (54)

Fairer attributes Warton's struggle to find a form for his work to his status as 'a pioneer', arguing that 'Warton was faced with the problem of how to make use (and sense) of all the material which lay before him' (54).

Like Warton, Ritson struggled to find a form in which to present his research. The *Observations* and the *Remarks* were derivative works that served to establish his reputation for good or ill, laying the groundwork for the reception of more substantial works. Ritson had outlined a plan for an edition of Shakespeare's plays, yet that would never be completed. He had begun work on the bibliographic 'Catalogue of Romances', even printing a sample in 1782. However, this work quickly became unpublishable, although Ritson would return to the form of the bibliographic catalogue with *Bibliographia Poetica*. As Lort had warned Percy, another work was already being prepared, 'a Collection of Old Ballads, in which I presume a former Editor is to be handled as roughly' (Nichols *Illustrations* VII: 443). With the *Select Collection of English Songs*, Ritson moved from the polemic works to the form in which he would make some of his most significant contributions: a carefully selected collection of edited texts, accompanied by an introductory essay and a selection of supporting paratextual material.

The publication of the *Select Collection* was announced in the *St. James's Chronicle*, in an announcement running over several issues in September of 1784:

*This Day was published,*

Price Twelve Shillings, or Fifteen Shillings bound,

Handsomely printed in three Volumes Crown Octavo, and adorned with a great Number of elegant Engravings,

A SELECT COLLECTION of ENGLISH SONGS. To which is prefixed an Essay on the Origin and Progress of Song Writing.

Printed for J. Johnson, NO. 72 St. Paul's Church-Yard.

☞ This Collection consists of the most esteemed and most valuable Pieces in the English Language, from the Reign of Queen Elizabeth to the present Time, selected with great Labour and Attention from numerous, authentick, and uncommon Books; corrected by the Collation of various Copies, and published with the utmost Fidelity and Care; many of them little known, and near 200 never before inserted in any Collection. Together with the original or most admired Tunes, selected, collated, and published with equal Diligence and Accuracy; the Names of the several Authours [*sic*] and Composers upon the best Authority; and a Variety of other interesting Particulars, illustrative of the Subject.

This Work being designed for a standing Repository of the Efforts of English Genius in Melody and Song, will, it is hoped, prove infinitely superior, in every Respect, to any Collection which has hitherto appeared. (qtd. in Bronson, 754)

Ritson's *Select Collection of English Songs* consists of a preface justifying and explaining the content and form of the collection, 'A Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song', and two volumes of songs divided into classes – Love Songs (subdivided into five subclasses), Drinking Songs, Miscellaneous Songs, and Ancient Ballads – each class opening and closing with an engraved vignette.

There are thus sixteen vignettes, most of them engraved by Blake after Stothard.<sup>16</sup> The frontispiece is by Heath after Fuseli. The third volume contains the music corresponding to the first two volumes, an index to the songs by first line, an index to the names of authors, and a section of 'corrections and additional notes'. Unusually for works printed in London at the time, the music was printed using moveable type, rather than engraved plates, presenting considerable technological challenges. The focus on the attacks on Percy, both by some of Ritson's contemporaries and scholars in the centuries since, has tended to overshadow both the rest of the essay and the body of the collection itself. Ritson had, in his early publications, deliberately established himself as an abrasive and antagonistic figure. Yet controversy plays a very minor role in the *Select Collection*: it is a carefully and ingeniously constructed work, a beautiful and elegant collection. In the *Select Collection*, Ritson develops a very different persona, for a different audience.

The preface is used to justify and explain the content and form of the collection, negotiating and establishing its place among apparently similar publications. As Ritson explains, justifications must be provided:

Publications of this nature are already so numerous that, if a preface had not, on any other account, been necessary, something of the kind would, doubtless, have been required, by way of apology, for adding one more to the number, particularly under so plain and unalluring a title as that with which the present volumes are ushered into the world. Every work, however, should be its own advocate, and so must this, whatever may be here alledged [*sic*] in its favour. (i)

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<sup>16</sup> 'Seven of the seventeen plates are signed by Blake as the engraver and Stothard as the designer. Unsigned pls. 3 and 4 are attributed to both on the basis of proofs noted for each below. Two other unsigned plates in the first volume, the frontispiece (based on a design by Fuseli) and p. 107, may have been executed by Blake, although James Heath, whose name appears in the plate on p.77 of vol. ii, might also be the engraver. Gilchrist 1863, i.51-52, praises the 'Blake-like feeling and conception' of these designs, particularly pls. 2 and 7 and 'one at the head of the Love Songs, a Lady singing, Cupids fluttering before her'. Several plates serves as headpieces to groups of love songs, but none fits Gilchrist's description. In the 1813 edition, revised by Thomas Park, unsigned wood engravings were substituted for the first-edition plates.' Essick, Robert N. *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations: A Catalogue and Study of the Plates Engraved by Blake after Designs by Other Artists* Clarendon Press: Oxford 1991.

Ritson must define the relationship of this work to the many apparently similar works, to outline how this collection is unique and, possibly, superior. The existence of other collections of English songs testifies to the potential popularity of the material, while discouraging the publication of redundant works, leaving Ritson with a difficult needle to thread to establish the ‘propriety’ of his collection (the term ‘propriety’ occurs at several points in the preface).

Dismissing entirely any competitors is a risky and arrogant strategy, and Ritson offers some caveats. He notes that ‘the editor is, however, aware that a late elegant collection, under the title of *Essays on Song-writing*, may be mentioned as an exception to every charge brought against preceding publications’ (ii). John Aikin’s collection had been published a decade earlier. However, Ritson argues, the limited scope of that admirable publication ensures that there is no competition, and so there is no risk to ‘the propriety of the present attempt’ (ii). It is in the context of this justificatory preface that the first attack on Percy occurs. Ritson’s fourth class, the ‘Ancient Ballads’, inevitably intruded on the field already claimed by Percy. To establish the propriety of offering his collection, Ritson must demonstrate how it differs from Percy’s *Reliques*. Ritson claims that this class is unique, ‘not to be found in any former compilation of this nature’ (ix). The ancient ballads are particularly important, as they provide a uniquely English foundation for a tradition of song – ‘the genuine effusion of the English muse, unadulterated with the sentimental refinements of Italy or France’ (ix). Ritson appeals to the accuracy of his collection, declaring that ‘Every piece in this class has been transcribed from some old copy, generally in black letter; and has, in most cases, been collated with various others, preserved in different repositories’ (ix). However, this leads to the inevitable confrontation:

Many of them, however, it must be confessed, are printed in the *Reliques of ancient English Poetry*; a work which may, perhaps, be by some thought to have precluded every future attempt. But, in truth, there is not the least rivalship, or even connection, between the two publications. And, indeed, if the contrary had been the case, the inaccurate, and sophisticated manner in which every thing that had real pretensions to antiquity has been printed by the right reverend

editor of that admired and celebrated work, would be a sufficient apology for any one who might undertake to publish more faithful, though, haply, less elegant copies.\* No liberties, beyond a necessary modernisation of the orthography, have been taken with the language of these antique compositions, unless in a few instances, where a manifest blunder of the press at once required and justified the correction. (x)

Ritson embeds his attack on Percy within an explanation of his editorial practice, and the broader context of a justification for his collection. Although he rejects the suggestion of ‘rivalship’, he defines his accuracy against Percy’s sophistication. The most serious attack is relegated to a footnote:

\*The truth of this charge, which will not, it is believed, much surprise any person conversant in the illustrious editors authorities, may, on some future occasion, be more minutely exemplified, and satisfactorily proved. It will be, here, sufficient to observe, that frequent recourse has, in compiling materials for the present volumes, been necessarily had to many of the originals from which the *Reliques* are professedly printed; but not one has, upon examination, been found to be followed with either fidelity or correctness. That the above work is beautiful, elegant, and ingenious, it would be ridiculous to deny; but they who look into it to be acquainted with the state of ancient poetry, will be miserably disappointed or fatally misled. Forgery and imposition of every kind, ought to be universally execrated, and never more than when they are employed by persons high in rank or character, and those very circumstances are made use of to sanctify the deceit. (x)

This is a serious attack, although Ritson makes some effort to downplay it, with backhanded compliments on the beauty and ingenuity of Percy’s work. Any person, he argues, who has consulted the original sources can plainly see Percy’s deception or sloppiness. Ritson presents his criticism as the unavoidable consequence of his research, although that research is kept in the background. The use of the term ‘forgery’ is a serious accusation, and Nicholas had to defend Ritson’s use of this



language nearly fifty years later. Ritson gestures towards Percy's recent appointment as the bishop of Dromore in his reference to sanctity. Brief attacks on Percy's integrity are made in the corrections and notes in the third volume, and Percy's minstrel theory is addressed in the 'Historical Essay'. Although they are an important feature of the work, and played a disproportionate role in its reception, they are a very small aspect of the *Select Collection*.

In the preface, Ritson identifies three key features of the *Select Collection* which serve to distinguish it from its potential competitors: selection, organization, and accuracy (prompting the comparison with Percy). Selection is the primary justification offered for the collection, a feature so intrinsic that it features in the 'plain and unalluring' title of the work. Through careful selection, Ritson hopes to change the way in which English song is understood:

There is not, it may be fairly asserted, any one language in the world possessed of a greater variety of beautiful and elegant pieces of lyric poetry than our own. But, so long as these beauties, this elegance, continue to be scattered abroad, suppressed, and (if one may be allowed the expression) buried alive, in a multitude of collections, consisting chiefly of compositions of the lowest, and most despicable nature; one or more being annually hashed up (*crambe repetita*) by needy retainers to the press, and the most modern being, always, infinitely the worst, (much of the one, and many of the other being, likewise interspersed through books of a very different cast, some of which are very voluminous, and others very scarce,) the greater part of this inestimable possession must, of course remain altogether unknown to the generality of readers. For who, let his desires and his convenience be what they may, will think it worth his while to peruse, much less to purchase, two or three hundred volumes, merely because each of them may happen to contain a couple of excellent songs? Every one who wishes to possess a pearl, is not content to seek it in an ocean of mud. (i).

Ritson seeks to demonstrate the existence and value of a genre of English songs – belonging to a community united by 'our own' language – and doing so requires

separating the wheat from the chaff. In this early articulation of Sturgeon's law, the best examples of the genre must be rescued from the frequent churn of collections and anthologies that had come to play a key role in the market. Aikin's work likewise begins with a preface justifying the work with the explanation that the worthwhile English songs must be rescued from trash under which they were buried, although Aikin is much harsher than Ritson, attributing the 'total decay of all taste for genuine poetry' to 'the fashionable rage for music, which had encouraged such a mushroom growth of *comic operas*, that vile mongrel of the drama' and proposing to 'form a barrier against the modish insipidity of the age' (iv).

The proliferation of anthologies and collections did not pass unremarked by Ritson's contemporaries. One review of Ritson's later work, the *English Anthology* (1793-4), begins with a reflection on the proliferation of collected works:

When any production has attained sufficient celebrity to outlive the short period of temporary publications, and to be thrown into the common stock of literature, it is wonderful in how many forms it afterwards meets the public eye. We find it in compendiums, selections, and collections. It is arranged, biographically, chronologically, historically – Sometimes its beauties, and sometimes its faults are extracted for the purpose of criticism. It is mixed up in miscellanies, and dealt out in quotations. One author produces the beginning, and another the end, as worthy of preservation. Bulky writers, contracting their size, like the devils in Milton's Pandemonium; sometimes, under the title of *essence*, or *esprit*, shrink into a duodecimo; and again, small productions swelled into importance by a profusion of notes, critiques, and observations, become a kind of nucleus, round which gathers an immense quantity of extraneous matter. – They solicit the notice of the public, sometimes by means of a new reading, and sometimes of a fresh type: their morality is extracted to make a part of one collection, and their anecdotes to furnish matter for another. By some they are cut down to school-books, and present themselves in ancient garb, and quaker-like attire; and by others they are spread out into all the luxury of

typographical elegance, by the joint labours of the printer and the engraver. In short, every admired piece is, like a beautiful statue placed in the midst of a star of walks; it is approached by a number of avenues in all directions, and presents itself in every possible variety of attitude. (*The Critical Review* Feb 1794, 196-197)

Ritson's contemporaries understood the ways in which placing the same work within a different framework could change the way it was read and understood. Even a widely read work could be approached by different paths, and the selection and organization of a collection could influence the ways in which the works within them were received.

Ritson's preface places his collection in the context of several overlapping trends, including the market-driven proliferation of collections and anthologies in this period. The preface is necessary in part because 'Publications of this nature are already so numerous' that an explanation for adding another is required. Ritson condemns the majority of collections of songs as rewarmed cabbage, 'compositions of the lowest, and most despicable nature; one or more being annually hashed up (*crambe repetita*) by needy retainers to the press'. As William St Clair has argued in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, after the lifting of intellectual property restrictions in 1774, 'a huge, previously suppressed, demand for reading was met by a huge surge in the supply of books, and was soon caught up in a virtuous circle of growth. All the older printed text first printed in England entered, or returned to, the public domain, available to be legally reprinted by anyone in Great Britain for sale through the country at whatever price their publishers chose to set' (115). One consequence of this was 'a boom in anthologies, abridgements, adaptations, simplified and censored versions, and books sold in parts' (118). In 1777, the case of *Bach v Longman* determined that printed music had the same status as literary texts (132). In such a context, it is unsurprising that editors must provide a justification for their collection, in the form of better selection, ingenious organization, greater accuracy or greater elegance than their competitors. While Ritson defined himself against Percy, the works of both men appeared against a backdrop of cheaper, more ephemeral, market-driven collections which did not make the same claims for scholarly rigor. Notably, all of Ritson's publications were produced within the period

that St Clair identifies as the ‘copyright window’ of 1774 to 1808, during which an ‘old canon’ of out-of-copyright work was established and widely disseminated.

The three volumes of the *Select Collection of English Songs*, which were sold for twelve shillings in boards, or fifteen shillings bound, were relatively expensive works to purchase. They were also expensive and difficult works to produce. Besides the challenges of printing music, the engraved vignettes and frontispiece represented a considerable investment. G.E. Bentley, extrapolating from Blake’s other commissions, estimates that Blake would have been paid ninety-six pounds for the nine vignettes that can be firmly attributed to him, possibly the largest commission he received that year (21). Ritson’s publisher, Joseph Johnson, was taking a considerable risk. He would have to sell well over two hundred copies simply to recoup the cost of all sixteen vignettes, let alone the frontispiece or the cost of paper and printing.

Direct evidence of Ritson’s relationships with his publishers is frustratingly scant. Ritson’s bibliography makes it clear that he had a longstanding relationship with Johnson. Johnson had published the *Remarks* the year before, and would publish his subsequent attack on the editors of Shakespeare, *The Quip Modest* (1788) and the first of his antiquarian collections, *Ancient Songs* (1790). *Scotish Songs* (1794) was published by ‘J. Johnson and J. Egerton’, and *Robin Hood* (1795) by ‘T. Egerton and J. Johnson’. Johnson was responsible for the original versions of the ill-fated *Caledonian Muse*, Bronson speculating that some ‘friction’ between Ritson and ‘his publisher of a dozen years’ standing’ might account for some of the complications in the history of that work, although he too is hampered by the lack of evidence (‘The Caledonian Muse’ 12-3). While it is clear that a relationship existed, evidence of the nature of this relationship is sparse. There are no letters to or from Ritson in the collection of Johnson’s letters held in the Pforzheimer Collection of the New York Public Library, recently edited by John Bugg. Nor is there any discussion of Ritson in Gerald Tyson’s *Joseph Johnson, A Liberal Publisher* (1979), or in Helen Braithwaite’s more recent *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (2003). While the latter is primarily interested in Johnson’s explicitly political output, the former outlines the principles that governed Johnson’s career more generally, some of which may be applicable to his relationship with

Ritson. Tyson argues that, in general, Johnson ‘followed a “liberal” path. This meant that the books he issued tended consistently to oppose the status quo, to challenge the established givens, and to dissent from received opinions’ (xvii). During the period in which the *Select Collection* was planned and published, Johnson, have established his business on a sound footing, began to cultivate ‘a consistent group of writers forming two loose but concentric “circles”’, the first based in London and a more dispersed circle throughout the country (66). The gradual expansion of the London circle over the course of the 1780s ‘resulted in the establishment of an important and influential radical coterie that, for the next ten years or so, would make significant contributions through Johnson as a publisher to social, political, and literary developments in England’ (66). The establishment of this circle influenced Johnson’s practice as a publisher, as he ‘cultivated a group of knowledgeable friends who reviewed submissions and made recommendations’, while soliciting further work from those who proved reliable or whom he wished to support (58). It is probable that that Johnson was responsible for Blake’s involvement in the collection, but, as Ritson would be the first to object, there is simply no evidence.

The only reference in Ritson’s surviving letters to Johnson’s role in the publication of the *Select Collection of English Songs* is found in a letter to Matthew Wadeson dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1786, in which Ritson responded to Wadeson’s attempts to effect a reconciliation between Ritson and the Stockton bookseller and publisher R. Christopher. After Ritson had moved to London, he depended upon Christopher to handle many of his literary and financial affairs in his hometown. Letters direct Christopher to provide his young nephew with the reading material that Ritson recommended and ensure that funds would be immediately available when his sister’s health reached its final crisis. While Ritson’s major publications were published in London, several smaller, cheaper works for a more local audience were published in Stockton by Christopher, including a collection of nursery rhymes, *Gammer Gurton’s Garland*, and *The Bishopric Garland*. However, the relationship became strained, in part as a result of a disagreement over copies of the *Select Collection*. In response to a letter from Wadeson, Ritson examined Christopher’s letters (which have not survived) and extracted the relevant passages:

In consequence of what you told me passed between Christopher and you, upon the subject of the books, I have looked over his letters and send you such extracts from them, as I trust will convince both you and him that the copies he took were entirely on his own account.

In a letter, dated May 9<sup>th</sup> 1779, he says, "I will take twelve copies of your song book, and, if you send none yourself to Matt [Wadeson], or any other person here, I will take *twenty-five*." I believe he has no reason to say that I did not comply with the condition.

Again, June 11<sup>th</sup> 1780. "When your book is ready, I will take a few copies of *your part* of 'em'"

Again, Nov. 14, 1783. "*I wish you'll send those songs as soon as possible.*" This was soon after I had left Stockton, where we had had some conversation about those same songs, in the course of which, on my giving him Mr. R. Hoars list of subscribers, he enlarged the number of copies he had agreed to take to *thirty-five*, which were afterwards sent, as appears by a letter, dated October 3d, 1784, where he says, "I received the collection of songs from Mr. Johnson just before our races – have sent them to most of the subscribers in the list you gave me." Please to ask him how many names there were in that list.

Though Christopher might have his reasons for procuring, as he did, a dissolution of the intimacy between us, and which I am very ready to allow was of little pecuniary advantage to him, I am rather surprised he should assert that the copies I sent were to be upon *my* account, as he either should have known that the contrary was the fact, as is apparent both from his own letters and the nature of the transaction itself; and I am confident that if no disagreement had taken place between us, that assertion would never have been made, nor the idea entertained. Perhaps neither you nor I should mistake the true motive of Mr. Christophers conduct, upon this occasion were we to take the trouble of guessing at it. But it is no matter, I only hope he

will settle the balance with you according to his own promise, without rendering it necessary for me to say any thing further upon the subject. (I: 111-113)

It is perhaps typical of Ritson that one of the few surviving source of information about the publication of the collection is found in an attempt to assemble evidence to establish his justification in a quarrel. Still, this exchange does suggest several intriguing details. Ritson remained in close contact with a network of old friends in Stockton, who took an active role in circulating his collection, soliciting a large number of subscriptions over several years, and distributing the completed work. Wadeson, a grocer, also assisted Ritson by teaching his nephew the violin, arranging his sister's funeral, and sending him ale and cheese from home (Bronson 107-108). Ralph Hoar, who provided him with similar assistance, left Stockton for India as a lieutenant in the British Army, writing to Ritson in 1785 that he had named his dog after his old friend (*Letters* lxxii). On New Year's Day, 1787, Ritson send his distant friend a long humorous letter in verse, filled with gossip (117-125). The preparations for the publication of the *Select Collection* were underway as early as 1779 – long before the publication of the *Observations* or the *Remarks*. Ritson, preparing and publishing his polemics, did so in the knowledge that they would establish the context in which his more substantial work would appear. Did Johnson, who published the *Remarks*, consider how they might influence the sale of the forthcoming *Select Collection*? Ritson's conflict with Christopher provides an important reminder that these were expensive works, with narrow margins for profit. The *Select Collection* is a work by an antiquary but it is not primarily an antiquarian collection for an antiquarian audience.

The Preface to the *Select Collection* identified four significant features: the selection of the material, the accuracy of Ritson's editorial approach, the interior organization, and the historical essay. The four sections of this chapter will address each in turn, exploring the choices Ritson made in the construction of the *Select Collection*. The *Select Collection* did not have the long-term influence or significance of some of Ritson's other works. However, this collection, as much as Ritson's polemics or his work on Robin Hood or Medieval romance, played a role in Ritson's presentation of himself and his work. Incorporating this collection into a

study of Ritson adds important nuance to the understanding of his work and its initial reception.

### **‘Selected with great Labour and Attention’**

Selection justifies the collection and sets it apart from its competitors. In his preface, Ritson defines the borders of ‘English Song’, for the purposes of this collection, and states the criteria which govern his selection. To produce a *Select Collection of English Songs* requires, at the very least, decisions about how to define ‘English’ and ‘Song’, for the immediate purposes of the collection if not more generally.

Ritson begins his defence of a collection of English song with the bold claim that ‘There is not, it may be fairly asserted, any one language in the world possessed of a greater variety of beautiful and elegant pieces of lyric poetry than our own.’ The ‘Historical Essay’, which will be discussed at the end of the chapter, traces the ‘origin and progress of national song’. Defining ‘English’, both generally and for the purposes of the collection, could be fraught, shifting between linguistic and national definitions. The relationship and distinction between English and Scottish poetry and song, which proves a constant theme in Ritson’s work, is first articulated in the preface to the *Select Collection*. Ritson omits Scottish songs from the collection, and responded directly to the easily imagined objections of potential readers:

By those who, in reading the present collection, shall happen to remark the careful omission of all Scottish songs, it may be expected that the editor should give some reasons why no pieces of that denomination, many of which are universally allowed to possess the highest degree of poetical merit, have been inserted. It might, perhaps, be sufficient, on this occasion, to plead the words of the title, which only promises ENGLISH Songs; but the editor is not, however, without a further, and, he would willingly hope, a more satisfactory apology; which is, an intention to present the public, at some future opportunity, with a much better and more perfect collection of songs ENTIRELY SCOTISH, than any that has been hitherto attempted: he must, therefor, intreat [*sic*] the patience of such of his readers as are



disappointed by, or may happen to complain of the present omission, till such intended publication appear. In the mean time [*sic*], should any pieces of Scottish extraction be discovered in these volumes, which there is every reason to think will not be the case, he has only to confess his ignorance of their origin, and to desire better information. (vi-vii)

The inclusion or exclusion of Scottish songs and poetry in collections (and how ‘Scottish’ and ‘English’ might be distinguished as linguistic or national categories) had a long history, and continues today. One of the most heavy-handed collections in that regard was Thomas Warton’s *The Union: or Select Scots and English Poems*, published in Edinburgh by Archibald Monro and David Murray in 1753. Like Ritson, Warton must offer a preface justifying his selection and its relationship to the other collections available (although there were notably far fewer in 1753 than in 1784). Warton begins with a reflection on the unique pleasures produced by poetic miscellanies:

As the mind of man is ever fond of variety, nothing seems better calculated to entertain, than a judicious collection of the smaller (tho’ not on that account less-labour’d) productions of eminent poets: an entertainment not unlike that which we receive from surveying a finish’d landscape [*sic*], or well-dispos’d piece of shell-work: where each particular object, tho’ singly beautiful, and sufficiently striking by itself, receives an additional charm, thus (as Milton expresses it) SWEETLY INTERCHANG’D. (n.p.)

He credits Dryden with the ‘first miscellaneous collection of poems, that ever appear’d in Great-Britain with any reputation’, and notes that since that collection many more have appeared in both England and Scotland, none of which, with the possible exception of Pope’s, were of much value, until the recent work of Robert Dodsley, ‘the best miscellany at this day extant in our language...which boasts the greatest names of the present age among its contributors’. Dodsley, however, did not include any Scottish works, or did not distinguish them if he did, leaving a niche open for Warton’s collection:

As to the poetical collection here exhibited to the public, we apprehend it challenges no small degree of regard, as it was made under the immediate inspection and conduct of several very ingenious gentlemen, whose names it would do us the highest honour to mention; and as it contains a variety not to be found in the admirable collection last spoken of; I mean the Intermixture of poems both Scotch and English. Nor is this variety less agreeable than useful; as from it, we have an opportunity of forming a comparison and estimate of the taste and genius of the two different nations, in their poetical compositions.

The collection embodies a poetic union, in which the Scotch and the English can coexist as distinct nations, brought together into a larger whole. The combination of disparate parts for aesthetic effect could be extended to include the juxtaposition of modern and ‘ancient’ works:

It is hope that the ancient Scottish poems (amongst which THE THISTLE AND THE ROSE, and HARDYKNUTE are more particularly distinguished) will make no disagreeable figure among those of modern date; and that they will produce the same effect here, as Mr. Pope observes a moderate use of old words may have in a poem; which (adds he) is like working old abbey-stones into a modern building, and which I have sometimes seen practiced with good success.

Warton’s selection (about which much more could be said), combines, in apparently no particular order, the best contemporary poetry (e.g. ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ and ‘The Tears of Scotland’) with older works, suggesting that old and new works from both nations could be incorporated into a coherent tradition. There were limits to the acceptability of linguistic diversity: the Scottish works were (silently) modernized and anglicised to different degrees. Dunbar’s ‘The Thrissil and the Rois’ was so heavily modified that it might be considered a translation, while the extract from David Lyndsay’s ‘Dreme’ is more lightly altered.

While Warton sought to unite English and Scottish poetry, other editors sought to establish distinct traditions through their selection and arrangement of

collections. When Ritson's promised *Scottish Songs* appeared in 1794, the preface, largely an analogue to that of the *English Songs*, was used to acknowledge and negotiate the relationship with the existing Scottish collections, most notably Allan Ramsay's *Tea-table Miscellany* and *The Ever Green*, and Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*.

Drawing on Percy's correspondence, Robert Rix argues that Percy, in *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) and *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), sought to establish an English alternative to the popularity of Scottish poetry, particularly Ossian. Rather than simply drawing a distinction between English and Scottish poetry, Percy 'saw the dividing line to be a question of language, culture, and ethnicity, for which the real boundary was drawn *within* Scotland: between the Anglo-Saxon Lowland and the Celtic Highland. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* was a collection of poems *in* English rather than exclusively *from* England' (200). Percy's emphasis on a Skaldic tradition that united the north of England, the Borders and the Lowlands, but excluded the Highlands, forms a running theme throughout his works, providing an English identity that elides some distinctions while emphasising others. Percy promoted his understanding of the relationship between Scottish and English poetry through the selection and arrangement of texts within the *Reliques*. Ritson offers a different division, for both the immediate practical purposes of publication and broader theoretical divisions.

Ritson's preface briefly touches on the complexities of definition when linguistic and national categories do not neatly align. Scotland can wait for a separate collection, but Ireland is another matter entirely:

With respect to the lyric productions of our now sister-kingdom Ireland, the best of them have been generally esteemed and ranked as English songs, being few in number, and possessing no national, or other peculiar or distinguishing marks;\* of these, however, the number is very few, and that which might be deemed the most exceptionable, the HUNTING SONG at page 168, vol.II. may be well pardoned on account of the superior excellence of its composition to most others on the same subject (vii)

A footnote offers an elaboration of his reasoning:

\*The distinction between *Scotish* and *English* songs, it is conceived arises – not from the language in which they are written, for *that* may be common to both, but – from the country to which they respectively belong, or of which their authors are natives. This discrimination does not so necessarily or properly apply to Ireland; great part of which was colonised from this kingdom, and the descendants of the settlers, the only civilised and cultivated inhabitants, have, consequently, been, ever since, looked upon as *English*: the native *Irish* being, to this day, a very different people. Every one has heard of the ENGLISH PALE.  
(vii)

If the English are understood as colonizers, then works produced in English in Ireland can simply be claimed as English, part of a displaced English tradition, and anything Irish is simply beyond the pale. In the historical essay, he generally notes when writers are born in Ireland, identifying Swift as a satirist and propagandist who wrote for both Irish and English audiences, and Goldsmith and Cunningham as both countrymen and among the best recent writers of song, but if they write in English they can be interpreted as a part of an English tradition (lxvi, lxix). However, the label of ‘Irish poetry’ is reserved for works in Irish Gaelic.<sup>17</sup>

To define the borders of ‘English Song’ requires a definition of both ‘English’ and ‘Song’. Ritson offers a brief description of his working definition of the latter:

In explaining the nature and methodical disposition of these volumes, it may not be impertinent to premise that, as the collection, under the general title of SONGS, consists, not only of pieces strictly and properly so called, but likewise, though in great disproportion as to number, of BALLADS or mere narrative compositions, the word SONG will, in the course of this preface, be almost very where used in its confined sense; inclusive, however, of a few modern and

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<sup>17</sup> Ritson’s later correspondence with the Irish antiquary Joseph Cooper Walker suggests that he came to reconsider this position and adopt a more nuanced view.

sentimental ballads, which no reader of taste, it is believed, will be inclined to think out of place. (ii)

Songs may be 'strictly and properly' defined in contrast to the narrative ballads, although hyponymy complicates this division. Appeals to taste prove more influential than strict divisions, although the distinctions are clear enough that the preface deals with the first three classes of 'Song' separately from the fourth class of 'Ancient ballads', which is evaluated using different principles. At the end of the preface, Ritson takes up the definition of 'song' once again: 'A TUNE is so essentially requisite to perfect the idea which is, in strictness and propriety, annexed to the term SONG, in its most extensive sense, that every compilation of words or poetical part of the songs, likewise include their respective melodies or tunes, in the character appropriated to the expression of musical language, must necessarily be defective and incomplete' (xi). Throughout the preface and the 'Historical Essay', 'song' is used in a number of broader and narrower senses, not always directly applicable to the texts which form the body of the collection.

Songs require music, therefor printed collections of songs require printed music. Ritson offers a spirited defence of universal musical literacy:

That this character is not familiar or intelligible to the general eye can be no objection. It is, indeed, much to be lamented that it is not rendered more so, by becoming an established branch of education. There are, however, many to whom the perusal of music is not more difficult, or less delightful, than the reading of poetry: and few, very few, are so unfortunate as to be incapable of perceiving the force and beauty of the language conveyed by these technical characters, when conveyed to the ear. Most people can either sing, whistle or hum some favourite air; and is not that ignorance to be lamented which does not permit them to read and write what they can thus utter? No apology is, therefor, necessary for the most useful and essential appendix subjoined to the present volumes, even to those who do not understand it; because they may easily receive the full benefit of it from those who do; and the latter will, it is imagined, be too sensible of its use to require one. (xi)

Ritson acknowledges that not everyone will be able to read the music, although everyone should (Ritson spent these years attempting to ensure that his nephew acquired some musical proficiency). Although Ritson's own proficiency is difficult to determine, Bronson argues convincingly that Ritson relied heavily on assistance from his friend William Shield (87-89). Producing a printed collection required fixing song in print, which could in turn be translated into performance, enabling even the musically illiterate to benefit from the collection, an argument that relies upon the assumption of shared communal enjoyment.

The inclusion of music leads to further problems. Ritson must, once again, justify his selection. He explains the difficulties in conducting this research: 'many of the old melodies (especially those of the ancient ballads) are, it is to be feared, irrecoverably lost; and of later compositions, some have never been sent to the press, and others, which have, are not now to be obtained but by mere accident', an explanation for the 'airs unknown' of the third volume (xii). However, he again assures readers that his research has been exhaustive, and as 'There are not many preceding publications which have made this their object; and a competition from these is not at all dreaded' (xii). Ritson's confidence was not misplaced. Examining Ritson's complaints about the technical difficulties of printing music, Maureen N. McLane observes that

The ballad collection was a strikingly hybrid genre, including anything and everything from manuscripts to broadsides to legal documents to extracts from chronicles to tunes to copperplate illustrations to woodblock prints. As we have seen, the emergent genre of the ballad collection could encompass words and tunes, texts and musics. Yet, as Ritson's complaint highlights, ballad collections did not process these differential media with equal panache. Most ballad editors eschewed the printing of tunes – notably Walter Scott, who managed to publish several editions of his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* with no music, until the posthumous 1833 edition. (94-95)

For Scott, McLane argues, ballads were not understood, or published, musically, although they were for other collectors, notably Robert Burns in his contributions to

the *Scots Musical Museum* (95). Ritson also offers profuse apologies to ‘such fair readers as may complain of the want of a bass part for their harpsichords’, explaining that

most of the old melodies are without any accompaniment; that to others the bass has been added by different and inferior composers (a liberty which may still be taken for the accommodation of those who require it); and that the sole object of this compilation was the voice and song, to which the bass would have been of no service. For a similar reason, no regard has been paid to any symphony or harmony, or to the compass of any particular instrument. (xii)

Ritson condemns modern composers who do violence to the poetry when setting them to music, explaining that when this becomes too extreme he omits the music altogether (xiii).

In practice, the precise relationship between the ‘words and poetical part of the song’ and their ‘respective melodies or tunes’, could be complex. Although any publication of the text of a song without the accompanying music ‘must necessarily be defective and incomplete’, the uncertainties of textual transmission ensured that Ritson had no choice but to produce a defective work. For a substantial portion of the songs, no tune is provided. In many cases, this is explained with a variation on ‘no air known’, which a footnote explains should be taken to mean that ‘no more than that the tune has not come to *the Editors knowledge*. In some places they imply certainty. The different instances are not worth pointing out’ (n.p.). In other cases, Ritson deliberately excludes a tune as not worth including, or offers a judgement between different settings.

A subset of the songs included in the collection are extracted from theatrical works. With these songs, a researcher could be confident that text and music had coexisted in performance. However, there could still be a great deal of variety in the relationship between them. New music could be set to pre-existing texts; new texts could be adapted to pre-existing music. Text and music could be composed at the same time, either by a single creator or by a poet and composer working together. However they first came into existence, they could only be included in a work such as Ritson’s *Select Collection* if they reached print, if a copy of the printed record

survived, and if Ritson was able to find a surviving copy. For example, six songs are attributed to Shakespeare:

‘Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more’ *Much Ado About Nothing* (I.262)

‘Blow, blow thou winter wind’ *As You Like It* (II.117)

‘When daffodils begin to peer’ *The Winter’s Tale* (II.143)

‘When daysies pied, and violets blue’ *Loves Labour Lost* (II.144)

‘When icicles hang by the wall’ *Love’s Labour Lost* (II.144)

‘Under the green wood tree’ *As You Like It* (II.145)

For five of these six, Ritson is only able to provide the music recently composed by Thomas Arne. For Ritson, in this collection, songs can include poetry composed with music, or to existing music (as was the case for the ballads), but generally seems to mean lyric poetry which in form and content was suited to being set to music, which could be done by composers sometime after the poetry was written (thus, songs in the sense that *Songs of Innocence and Experience* were songs). Some of the most recent songs had not been set to music, but were labelled as ‘songs’ when initially published (for example, in the works of Anna Laetitia Aikin or Oliver Goldsmith).

Printing music imposes its own technological challenges. Ritson’s collection was unusual in the use of type rather than engraving. As McLane notes, ‘Historians of printed music tell us that most eighteenth-century music published in Britain was engraved, not typeset. While Ritson struggled to find adequate type, most other balladeers – if they deigned to print music – turned to engraving, at least until the spread of lithography’ (94). In his preface, Ritson railed against the difficulty of finding adequate type:

The types here made use of presented the only mode of printing the music which could be adopted. The reader may be surprised to learn that, in this great kingdom, where all arts and sciences are supposed to flourish in their highest perfection, there is not, perhaps, above one printer possessed of a sufficient quantity of these useful characters, and that of no other size. They who are acquainted with the degree of elegance to which this and every other branch of the typographical art are arrived upon the continent, or have even looked into that most beautiful specimen of it, the ANTHOLOGIE FRANÇOISE, will have



sufficient reason to condemn that purblind and selfish policy which can restrain and prevent all emulation in science in favour of private monopoly. (xiii)

Ritson provides an explicit reminder of the material circumstances in which his collection was produced. 'Directions to the Binder' which survive in some copies of the third volume explain that the music can either be bound as the third volume, or divided into two sections and bound with the appropriate volumes, although I have not identified any copies surviving in this form. An 'Advertisement' to the third volume suggests that the two volume version was Ritson's original plan, but was abandoned when it became too unwieldy, resulting in some inconsistencies in cross-referencing. Ritson's choices were constrained by the availability and cost of the technology, itself constrained by a system of patents and monopoly. He casts this in an explicitly national light, a source of potential national shame or pride. In the posthumous second edition, lightly edited and considerably expanded by Thomas Park, Park inserts a footnote to this paragraph, in which he recalls that 'The types for the music in this edition were twice cast by Mr. Caslon, before they could be employed: and even the second fount is much more defective in blending the ligatures of notes than might be wished' (xvii). In a series of articles on Ritson's English and Scottish collections of songs, Janet Sorensen explores the different treatment of song in the English collection (in which text and music are printed in separate volumes) and the Scottish collection (in which text and music coexist on the same page). Although, as Sorensen argues, this presentation reflected different notions of the relationships between song, text and orality for English and Scottish material, the choices that Ritson made in the publication of these collections were also the result of a series of practical compromises. The *Anthologie Française ou Chansons Choiesies, depuis le 13e siècle jusqu'à present* (1765), which provides the avowed model for the *Select Collection*, prints text and music together. It is possible that Ritson considered this the ideal form for a collection, but was unable to realize a work in this form until the publication of *Scotish Songs*. The comparison with the *Anthologie Française* places the *Select Collection* in an international context. Other nations were constructing (and printing) their own selections of songs and literary histories, so England must do the same.

Once the borders of ‘English Song’ had been established, further selection was necessary. As Ritson had argued, the primary purpose of the collection was to identify and preserve the best, the most beautiful, and the most elegant English songs, and in doing so to establish the excellence of the genre. Once its contents had been carefully selected, the collection could, ideally, serve several purposes:

Entirely, then, to remove every objection to which the subject is, at present, open; to exhibit all the most admired, and intrinsically excellent specimens of lyric poetry in the English Language at one view; to promote real, instructive entertainment; to satisfy the critical taste of the judicious; to indulge the nobler feelings of the pensive; and to afford innocent mirth to the gay; has been the complex object of the present publication. How far it will answer these different purposes, must be submitted to time, and the judgement, taste, and candour of its various readers. (ii)

Ritson offers two distinct measures of quality: there are those works whose worth is already recognized, the popular and ‘most admired’, and those ‘intrinsically excellent specimens of lyric poetry’ which might not yet be recognized as such. Excellence is the chief criteria for inclusion, although the least defined. For the purposes of inclusion in the collection, ‘excellence’ could override most other considerations. As noted above, Ritson included an Irish hunting song, on the justification of ‘the superior excellence of its composition to most others on the same subject’, although his vegetarian principles required a condemnation of the genre, ‘in general, as utterly void of poetry, sense, wit, or humour, as the practice they are intended to celebrate, whether it be the diversion of the prince or the peasant, is irrational, savage, barbarous, and inhuman’ (vii).

While excellence provided the chief criteria for inclusion, exclusion was equally necessary. Political songs are excluded as too ephemeral, their satire losing its edge once their moment has passed, and ‘songs on what is called Freemasonry’ are dismissed as of little general interest (viii). Some exclusions carry assumptions about the intended audience of the collection. At several points in the preface, Ritson appeals directly to female readers, or, as he repeatedly insists on calling them, ‘his

fair readers'. The description of the arrangement of the classes concludes with a declaration of submission:

This arrangement, which is as comprehensive as it is particular, and will, it is hoped, be found to have been executed with all the care and attention so new and difficult a project could require, the editor wholly submits to the taste and judgement of his fair readers; who, he trusts, will receive the highest and most refined amusement, not without considerable instruction, from every part of the volume; which, certainly, contains a much greater number and variety of elegant and beautiful compositions on the above interesting subject than were ever attempted to be brought together in any former collection, or than it would be even possible for them elsewhere to meet with. (iv)

Ritson reiterates the 'complex object' of his collection – amusement and instruction – for a specific class of potential readers. Similarly, the principal of selection that receives the most explicit explication was the 'scrupulous anxiety...to exclude every composition, however celebrated, or however excellent, of which the slightest expression, or the most distant allusion could have tinged the cheek of Delicacy, or offended the purity of the chastest ear', a scrupulousness which should be appreciated by 'his fair readers' (v).

Ritson's occasional references or addresses to his 'fair readers' underline the often neglected gendered aspect of literary antiquarian readership. Warton had characterized the potentially incompatible needs of different groups of readers as a conflict between 'the antiquary' and 'the man of taste', and Ritson adopted that language when responding directly to him. Both groups were strongly gendered, the latter explicitly, the former in practice. Sweet observes that 'The Republic of Letters was not, of course, exclusively populated by men, but with respect to antiquities the representation of women was conspicuous by its absence' (69). As Sweet outlines, this varied between different fields. Women were particularly excluded from the kinds of literary antiquarian research practiced by Ritson through their exclusion from the education – both classical and professional – and the homosocial networks

on which that research relied. Scott's Jonathan Oldbuck, a self-proclaimed misogynist, suggests the endurance of this trend.

When deciding whether to appeal to a narrow readership of fellow antiquaries, or to a more general reader, the gendered aspects posed an additional hurdle – for while the former could be understood as simply an extension of the homosocial antiquarian networks, the latter might include women. This provides an undercurrent to Ellis's discussion with Scott about the degree to which the orthography of *Sir Tristrem* should be modernized. Discussing whether to retain the form of the letter yogh, a decision dependent upon both the transcriber's skill and the resources of his printer, Ellis confides to Scott that 'I had difficulty in satisfying several very pretty pairs of eyes that Sir Lanval was capable of being perused at all after the admittance of that obnoxious letter' (MS 873 17r). The intended audience could influence the decorum of including bawdy passages in editions of early texts. Leyden had reservations about passages in *Sir Tristrem*, and reached out for advice. Ellis wrote to Scott to report that

Mr Leyden sent to Heber a verse from Sir Tristram which certainly, in modern English would not be quite decorous; but Douce, on my repeating the line to him, observed that a thousand such verses ought not to prevent the publication of the work; the ears of Antiquaries being like those of Confessors. In fact, as you justly observe, the extreme antiquity of the language is a complete fig-leaf, and you have the authority of Tyrwhitt for printing, en toutes lettres, a word on which the learned Junius has employed his whole stock of etymological talent (2v)

The offending passages were those that punned on 'quaint'. Tyrwhitt had retained similar passages in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, and Franciscus Junius had included an entry on the term in his *Etymologicum Anglicanum* (posthumously published in 1743). If the intended audience was understood to be an extension of the homosocial antiquarian network, which could circulate and discuss such works, it could be printed with propriety. Ultimately, Scott chose that to excise these passages, but printed a few 'uncastrated' copies which circulated as gifts. Editorial decisions reflected judgements about the intended readers of the collection. Through his

decisions, and the explicit discussion of those decisions in the preface, Ritson signals that the *Select Collection of English Songs* is aimed squarely at the general reader, a reader who might be a woman.

Ritson concludes the preface by offering his work to the public, reiterating and strengthening the justifications already offered. He begins with a declaration of his motives:

Impelled by no lucrative or unworthy motives, the publisher of the present volumes has been solely careful to do justice to the work; a purpose, to effect which neither labour nor expence [*sic*] has been spared. And he is vain enough to flatter himself [*sic*] that the public will have now in their possession, what has been so long wanted, so much desired, so frequently attempted, and hitherto, he thinks, so imperfectly executed, A NATIONAL REPOSITORY OF MELODY AND SONG. The intrinsic value of the work, in both respects, will be left to pronounce its own eulogium. The editor is, indeed, answerable for what may be deemed injudiciously preserved, or unjustly discarded. But, whatever may be the defects of any of the poetical or musical compositions he has inserted, he can safely aver that not a single performance of either kind was wilfully rejected without the most deliberate consideration. And, though he is conscious of having exerted his utmost endeavours to recover every song and melody of merit, he will not be forward to affirm that those endeavours have, in every instance, been crowned with success. Some few compositions there may undoubtedly be (for it is scarcely possible there should be many) which have eluded his researches, and with which he must be contented to refer his acquaintance to time, accident, more extensive enquiry, or liberal communication. The collection, as it is, will, it is hoped, be found infinitely superior, in every respect, to any publication of the like nature which has been yet offered to the public, to whose justice and candour it is resigned with pleasure; in a full confidence, that they will not think either that it is unworthy of their acceptance, or that too much has been here urged in praise. (xiv).

Ritson offers a statement about the purpose of the collection: a national repository. Selection is the final criteria on which it should be judged – does it include everything that ought to be included, and does it exclude everything ought to be excluded? Ritson offers a different self-presentation from that found in his polemics, though one which is still recognizable. He claims his authority through his extensive and exhaustive research, which is here displayed constructively, rather than to identify the flaws in the work of others. However, the collection must always be evaluated in the context of the other works available, and it is found to be not merely unique, but ‘infinitely superior’.

Selection was in fact the criteria on which the collection was judged. A brief acknowledgement of the publication appeared in the ‘New Publications’ portion of the *Westminster Magazine* for August of 1784,<sup>18</sup> echoing the language of the preface with the judgement that ‘The compiler has executed his task with taste and judgement, nothing exceptionable or offensive to decency has a place in this collection, which may truly be called a National Repository of Melody and Song and is far superior in every respect to any undertaking of a similar nature, which has been yet offered to the public’ (436). The most extensive review appeared in the October, 1784 issue of the *Critical Review*. The review begins with the observation that ‘Lyrics are, in general, considered the lightest and most trifling productions of the poet’, while ballads are often ridiculed and dismissed as vulgar (300). For a reader who accepts these judgements, ‘How a man of considerable knowlege [*sic*] and very extensive reading, as he really appears to be, could spend several years in collecting the materials for a work of this kind, will to them appear a matter of much surprize’ (300). For those who know better, ‘the ingenious editor of the present volumes may expect to meet with very different treatment: they will approve his taste, and applaud his industry’ (301). Descriptions of the work are quoted from the preface, with the conclusion that ‘In short, no pains or attention seem to have been spared in making it, what it is professed to be, a Select Collection of the best English Songs; and to print it in such a manner, the most likely to recommend it to the notice of the public’

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<sup>18</sup> This slightly antedates the earliest mentions of the collection located by Bronson, the announcements of publication which appeared in the *St. James's Chronicle* in mid-September.

(303). Selection provides the only opportunity for disagreement from the reviewer (the attack on Percy is quoted but passes without comment):

The editor is certainly much to be commended for his rejection of every piece offensive to decency; but we cannot help thinking that, in this particular, he has been too severely scrupulous.

We cannot conceive why the following songs were omitted *How imperfect is Expression some Emotions to impart – Free from Noise and free from Strife – Let Ambition fire they Mind – In Infancy our Hopes and Fears – Bow thy Head, thou Lily fair* – and several others of the like kind. Their want of merit could not be an objection; for they are undoubtedly superior to many that are to be found in the present volumes, and have, besides, this farther claim to attention, that they are generally admired. Most readers will likewise expect to find here *The Friar of Orders grey*, and Goldsmith's *Gentle Hermit of the Dale*. – But, notwithstanding a few omissions of this kind, for which the editor had probably his reasons, the work before us is undoubtedly the best collection of songs hitherto offered to the public. If some pieces are omitted which the reader might wish to have found, he will find many inserted of great merit, that had either escaped the notice, or were not suitable to the taste of former compilers. (303)

The reviewer engages with the *Select Collection* on the terms established in the preface. Noting the omission of Scottish songs, the review concludes:

The editor gives as a reason for this omission, that he means, at some future opportunity, to present the public with a more perfect collection of songs, entirely Scottish, than any that has hitherto been attempted. For this business he seems peculiarly well qualified; and we hope to find that the present performance will meet with such approbation as may induce him to pursue his design to its execution. (304)

This reviewer is apparently unaware of Ritson's identity and reputation, and evaluates the editor of the collection solely through internal evidence. The 'Historical Essay' is praised as 'evidently the production of a person well acquainted with this curious and valuable part of the history of our country; and contains many anecdotes

and particulars of the early writers in this branch of polite literature, which we do not remember to have seen in any other place' (304). Although Ritson's research is not foregrounded in the manner it would be in later works, it clear to this reader that a great deal of work underpins this collection, and that the author is 'a man of considerable knowledge and very extensive reading' and that 'no pains or attention seem to have been spared'.

However, other reviews began by attributing the *Select Collection* to Ritson, interpreting it in the context of the earlier *Observations*. In November, the *Gentleman's Magazine* printed a letter beginning

Mr Urban,                      Nov. 17

Strolling a few days since into a bookseller's shop on the Strand, I took up *A Select Collection of English Songs in Three Volumes*, said to be compiled by a Mr. *Ritson*. I had only time and opportunity for a cursory inspection; but I found that the editor, in his *Preface*, and Dissertation on *National Song* prefixed, has very illiberally and unfairly indulged himself in an abuse of some of the first critics of the present age, and even those to whom he appears to have been considerably indebted. (817)

Despite the claim of 'a cursory inspection', the letter-writer offers a detailed and outraged critique of the 'Historical Essay', with the accusation that it built upon Warton's conclusions, with the pointed observation that Ritson 'is probably better skilled in *black-letter* than in *Greek*' (817). The 'peevish insolence to the very learned and respectable Bp. Percy' is condemned and dismissed, with the conclusion that, contrary to Ritson's representations, he in fact adds nothing of value as an editor, as 'the compiler's merit seems to consist in detecting petty inaccuracies, in restoring readings, and adjusting particulars, of no consequence' and 'After Bp. Percy's *Reliques*, this collection was easily made' (818).

The brief review which appeared in the *Monthly Review* in September of 1785 consolidated both responses, opening 'This Collection of Songs has been made by Mr. Ritson, whom the literary world has more commended for his acuteness, than applauded for his candour' (234). Ritson's stated goals and organization are quoted, with brief praise for the proper omission of 'every song that could offend the most



delicate female' (234). Readers will find in the 'Historical Essay' 'much entertainment, and, indeed, instruction' (234). The overall evaluation is tepid:

There are some songs, which we are surprized not to have found in these volumes, and others which might have been omitted – but *de gustibus non disputandum*. – Yet still, on the whole, we think that this collection is preferable to any which has appeared. We must add, that Mr. Aikin's Essay on song-writing has met with the praise from Mr. Ritson, to which it is so well entitled; and that many of our readers will think the Bishop of Dromore's *Reliques of ancient Poetry* did not merit so very severe a censure!

With respect to the *Scotch Songs*, the editor promises them in a future collection. (234)

Ritson is the best there is at what he does, but what he does isn't very nice.

**'Corrected by the Collation of various Copies, and published with the utmost Fidelity and Care'**

Although selection is the primary feature of the collection, justifying its existence and providing the standard by which it is judged, accuracy is a close second. As the *Critical Review* concluded, the *Select Collection* was obviously the product of years of careful research. Ritson's justification for challenging the *Reliques* was built upon the investigations which revealed that Percy's works were inaccurate and sophisticated, and the assurance that in his own collection 'No liberties, beyond a necessary modernisation of the orthography, have been taken with the language of these antique compositions, unless in a few instances, where a manifest blunder of the press at once required and justified the correction' (x). The letter-writer of the *Gentleman's Magazine* responded with the accusation that Ritson's careful research and collation had contributed nothing of value. Both the selection and accuracy of the collection were identified as key attractions for readers in the announcement of publication which appeared in the *St. James's Chronicle*.

The selection of pieces and Ritson's thorough research were closely related, as the latter allowed him to assure readers that everything that should be included

had been, including deserving but forgotten pieces. Throughout his preface, Ritson emphasizes the scrupulousness of his research and the accuracy of his collection. Ritson assures his readers that ‘Most, if not all, of the pieces which form the three divisions already enumerated, will be found more accurately printed than in any former compilation; having been selected from the best editions of the works of their respective authors, and other approved and authentic publications, or corrected by a careful collation of numerous copies’ (vi). Although this collection lacks the elaborate textual notes that Ritson would employ in his more antiquarian works, readers are assured that the collection is built upon the foundation of a solid and thorough scholarly approach. One role that Ritson’s earlier polemics might have served was ensuring that the subset of readers most interested in accuracy associated his name with extensive research and the careful and knowledgeable collation of sources.

As the announcement promises, one manifestation of Ritson’s careful research is his ability to provide accurate attributions of authorship: ‘There is another advantage, which the present collection possesses unrivalled, and that is, the great number of names of the real authors of the songs, prefixed to their respective performances’ (vi). This function of the collection was important to at least one early reader. In a letter to John Moore, Robert Burns described works that had influenced him, including ‘a select Collection of English songs...The Collection of Songs was my vade mecum. – I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. – I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is’ (138-139). Bronson confidently identifies the collection as Ritson’s, although Ferguson and Roy note that Ritson’s collection was published too late to make a formative impact likely, suggesting Dodsley’s frequently reprinted *Collection of Poems* as an alternative. In either case, Burns certainly owned and read *The Select Collection of English Songs*. The second volume of Burns’s copy circulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a piece of Burnsiana. Now held by the National Library of Scotland, there are six holograph notes in this volume: all six are additional or corrected attributions provided by the ‘corrections’ in the third volume (Rb.s.1964,

pages 12, 88, 89, 100, 101 and 105). Although most of the authors identified are now obscure, reattaching their names to their songs was valued by some readers.

Although Ritson had already begun to examine manuscripts from thirteenth century, the criteria of elegance and merit imposed limitations on the chronological scope of the collection. In the classes of 'Songs', 'several pieces of some antiquity and great merit' are included, and 'it has been attempted to point them out to the reader, by affixing the signature O. (old) to those which appear to have been composed, or rather first published, within the course of the last century; and the letters V.O. (very old) to such as were printed before its commencement; unless the name of the author served to ascertain the age of his song with greater propriety' (viii). Although information about the age of the poem is provided, either obliquely by identifying the author or in a general way with 'O.' and 'V.O.', chronology does not, significantly, provide the structure of the collection. Ritson offers little chronological information about the 'Ancient Ballads', explaining that

The names of authors could not be prefixed, because they are unknown in most instances, and only imperfectly guessed at in the rest. Nor has the editor made any attempt to ascertain or distinguish their different age; a task, perhaps, unnecessary, certainly, impossible. The reader, not better informed, must, therefor, remain satisfied with this general assertion: That there is no reason to conclude any of them much older than the latter part of the reign of queen Elizabeth, nor any more modern than the time of king Charles the first. (x-xi)

Ritson's caution in attributing works to early dates is evident, as is the limits of how far back the collection itself can reach (the 'Historical Essay' is another matter).

Ritson assures his readers of accuracy and careful scholarship, but balances this with the requirements of a modern audience:

The orthography of the whole collection will, however, it is believed (except in a single instance [footnote: Song LII. Part II]) be found reduced to a modern, correct and uniform standard throughout; so far, at least, as established corruptions, and natural prejudice would easily permit. It may be, likewise, proper to remark that there is no one song here published, which was not in print before, although most of the

manuscript collections in the Harleian and other libraries in the Museum were carefully consulted for materials, without any other success than as they sometimes afforded an improved reading, of which the editor has in a very few places, where emendation was absolutely necessary, availed himself. (ix)

Ritson's research in the British Museum (and Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh) briefly surfaces, but does not provide the focus for the collection. In *The Making of Middle English*, Matthews traces a 'liberalizing' in Ritson's editorial stance between Ritson's *Ancient Songs* (1790) and *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* (1791), which were as close to facsimiles as was logistically feasible, and *Poems on Interesting Events in the Reign of King Edward III by Laurence Minot* (1795) and *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* (1802), which employed a conservative modernization of the orthography – expanding abbreviations and abandoning obsolete characters – demonstrating an 'evident accessibility and commitment to attractive readability' not found in the earlier works (45-46). If further data points are included, such as the *Select Collection*, a more complex and nuanced picture emerges. Ritson, throughout his career, employed a number of different editorial strategies to appeal to different audiences.

**'the interior order and disposition of the contents of each department is peculiar to the present volumes'**

The organization of Ritson's collection further served to distinguish it from its competitors. In a competitive market, the arrangement of collections served to distinguish one from another and allowed the editor to display their skill and justify their role:

It would have required a very small share of sagacity in the editor, to have puzzled and surprised his readers with a new, fanciful, and intricate arrangement of his materials under a multiplicity of descriptions. By such ingenious contrivances, he might possibly have received the credit of trouble which he never took, and of difficulties which he never encountered; but how far his ingenuity would have

benefited his readers, is a doubt which he does not find altogether so easy to solve. (iii)

Rather than novelty introduced for its own sake, Ritson offers a simple division into classes – Love Songs, Drinking Songs, Miscellaneous Songs, and Ancient Ballads – a division, he acknowledges, that ‘is too natural an idea to be a novel one’ (iii).

However, this natural simplicity masks a more elaborate and intricate structure: ‘The general distribution which has been preferred was, it is confessed, simple and ready; but the interior order and disposition of the contents of each department is peculiar to the present volumes, and required more accuracy and attention than will, perhaps, be immediately conceived, or it is here meant to describe’ (iii). Ritson offers a brief description of the organization of the classes. The largest class, the Love Songs, which forms the entirety of the first volume after the ‘Historical Essay’, is subdivided into five sections, ‘displaying or describing that sublime and noble, – that, sometimes, calm and delightful, – but more frequently violent, unfortunate, and dreadful passion, in all its various appearances, and with all its different effects, consequences and connections’ (iii). No explanation is given in the body of the collection, and yet, ‘the attentive reader will easily perceive, on the slightest inspection, the particular subject of each class. This will be rendered more obvious and familiar by the elegant and characteristic designs which precede and terminate each division’ (iii). Discerning the organizational principles of the work is, for some readers, one of the pleasures to be found in Ritson’s collection. However, not all readers have the patience, and Ritson offers a brief description for ‘they who may choose to consider the above mode rather a fatigue than a pleasure’:

The subjects peculiar to Class I. are diffidence, admiration, respect, plaintive tenderness, misplaced passion, jealousy, rage, despair, frenzy, and death: that in Class II. love is treated as a passion; with praise, contempt, reproach, satire, and ridicule: that Class III. exhibits the upbraidings [*sic*], quarrels, reconciliations, indifference, levity, and inconstancy of lovers; and it closed by a few pieces, in which their misfortunes or most serious situations are attempted to be thrown into burlesque: that Class IV. is devoted, solely, to professions of love from the fair sex: – the moral to be drawn from the ill consequences

of this passion being cherished, in such tender bosoms, by the fatal instances of those unhappy fair ones who have suffered it to overcome their prudence, will be too obvious, – as it is too melancholy, – to escape observation, or to need enforcing: that Class V. turns entirely upon the chaste delights of mutual affection, and terminates with some beautiful representations of connubial felicity, and a few, not impertinent, admonitions to its bright creators. (iii-iv).

Ritson offers an elaborate thematic division and arrangement, not only dividing the songs but ordering them in a deliberate sequence, so that each class as a whole cumulatively takes on an instructive and moral meaning independent of any one item. The arrangement of the collection is one of its most remarkable features, and yet is seldom remarked upon.

As he suggests in the preface, for an interested reader, discerning the structure of the collection, derived from the internal sequence of the classes and supported by the vignettes, is a source of pleasure in itself. A full discussion of Ritson's choices in this matter is beyond the scope of this chapter and would reward much further study. If the collection had contained the same selection of texts, arranged differently, it would have been a very different work. Within Ritson's careful arrangement, the songs speak to one another, as when in song six of the first class (Catherine Cockburn's 'Vain Advice') the warnings of dangerous eyes that had developed in the previous songs become explicit – 'Ah gaze not on those eyes! forbear / That soft enchanting voice to hear' – and is answered by song seven – 'Oh! forbear to bid me slight her, / Soul and sense take her part' (5-6).

Each class is carefully constructed, the songs gaining additional meaning through their arrangement in a sequence. The first class begins with songs in a diffident tone, reflecting on early love, with images of childhood, dawn, and the spring. The first is unattributed, beginning:

Ah Chloris! Could I now but sit  
As unconcern'd, as when  
Your infant beauty could beget  
No happiness nor pain.  
When I this dawning did admire,

And prais'd the coming day,  
 I little thought the rising fire  
 Would take my rest away. (1)

Ritson marks the song with 'O' for old, and it is the work of the Restoration wit Charles Sedley. It is immediately followed by a song by 'Miss Aikin' so recent that a footnote must mention that she has married since the publication of her poems and is 'Now mrs. Barbauld' (2). It begins:

When first upon your tender cheek  
 I saw the morn of beauty break  
 With mild and chearing beam,  
 I bow'd before your infant shrine,  
 The earliest sighs you had were mine,  
 And you my darling theme (2)

Rather than tracing the progress or the rise and fall of the genre, this collection emphasises a continuous tradition, a reminder that contemporary poets address the same themes in much the same manner as their predecessors, even two poets as unlike as Charles Sedley and Anna Letitia Barbauld. The selection continues, linking different songs across time through common conceits and repeated structures, moving through increasing jealousy and despair towards death. Disappointed shepherds lie down and don't get up again, bereaved lovers of both sexes toss themselves into the sea, and an abandoned woman's corpse is brought to her false lover's wedding (who dies as well). The section concludes with William Shenstone's ballad 'Jemmy Dawson', on one of 'the Manchester Regiment of volunteers in the service of the Young Chevalier, who were hanged, drawn, and quartered on Kennington-common, in 1746' (81). In the ballad, Dawson loves and is loved by 'dear Kitty' until 'partys hateful strife...led the favour'd youth astray' (82). The final ballad is both historically specific and, in the context of the other songs, timeless. While the woman in the opening vignette sits on a bench under a tree in a garden, looking down on a lover, the woman in the closing vignette sits under a cliff on a rocky shore, looking down at a corpse. In many of the classes, the opening and closing vignettes echo one another and have clear connections to the contents.

The other classes have similar structures. In the second class, 'love is treated as a passion; with praise, contempt, reproach, satire, and ridicule' (iv), and it opens with as vignette of seated figures listening to cupid playing the harp and Dryden's 'Address to Britain' suggesting that Venus and Cupid will be found in the 'Fairest isle, all isles excelling' (86). By the end of the class, the listeners have turned on him, and he becomes a figure of ridicule (198). The third class 'exhibits the upbraidings, quarrels, reconciliations, indifference, levity and inconstancy of lovers; and is closed by a few pieces, in which their misfortunes or most serious situations are attempted to be thrown into burlesque' (iv). It opens with quarrelling lovers, and ends with a dance around a maypole. The fourth 'is devoted, solely, to professions of love from the fair sex: – the moral to be drawn from such tender bosoms, by the fatal instances of those unhappy fair ones who have suffered it to overcome their prudence, will be too obvious, – as it is too melancholy, – to escape observation, or to need enforcing' (iv). It opens with a woman writing in a dark room, and closes with a woman alone with an open book. The obvious and melancholy conclusion is provided by Goldsmith:

When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
And finds too late that men betray,  
What charm can sooth her melancholy?  
What art can wash her guilt away?

The only art her guilt to cover,  
To hide her shame from every eye,  
To give repentance to her lover,  
And wring his bosom, is – to die. (170)

For a reassuring conclusion, the final class 'turns entirely upon the chaste delights of mutual affection, and terminates with some beautiful representations of connubial felicity, and a few, not impertinent, admonitions to its bright creators' (iv). In the opening vignette, the young man holds his lover's hand and gestures towards a church, while in the final closing vignette a happy couple are surrounded by small children (171, 254). Ritson uses the arrangement of his songs to suggest a moral



point, a message drawn from the cumulative arrangement of his texts rather than any individual song.

The three classes which make up the second volume – Drinking Songs, Miscellaneous Songs, and Ancient Ballads – are less elaborately, but still deliberately, arranged. The first of these offers Ritson the opportunity of a reflection upon categorization and prestige:

The second part, or first division of the other volume, comprises a small quantity of Anacreontics, *i.e.* Bacchanalian, or, with the readers [*sic*] permission, (and the title is not only more simple, but more general and proper) DRINKING SONGS; *chansons à boire*; most of which may be reasonably allowed to have merit in their way: but the editor will candidly own that he was not sorry to enlarge this part of the collection with credit, (and he may, probably, as it is, have been too indulgent) prove altogether fruitless: a circumstance, perhaps, which will, some time or other, be considered as not a little to the honour of the English muse. (iv-v)

Ritson offers a playful suggestion of the different status and connotations of the Greek, Latin, English and French labels, before committing firmly to the English option.<sup>19</sup> Whatever traditions of drinking song exist cross-linguistically, it is the body of English texts and how they reflect the English character that is at stake. He claims to be exhaustive in his research but ruthless in his decisions about what to reject. Ritson gestures towards the public, male, and aristocratic sphere of the Anacreontic Society, while producing his own strictly restrained work for a mixed audience.

Whatever they are called, the ‘Drinking Songs’ are ingeniously arranged. Once again, the arrangement of the songs suggests links between them, opening, after a jovial and sociable vignette, with the exhortation:

Pho! pox o’this nonsense, I prithee give o’er,  
And talk of your Phillis and Chloe no more;  
Their face, and their air, and their mien – what a rout!

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<sup>19</sup> In his revised edition of 1813, Park objects to Ritson’s choice, and suggest Aikin’s ‘convivial’ songs as a more decorous alternative (vi).

Here's to thee, my lad! – push the bottle about. (1)

Rejecting the conventional pastoral love poetry of the first volume in favour of drink, the fifty-eight songs in this section provide a range of responses, from light-hearted conviviality which transcends social divisions to desperate rejections of inevitable death, ending with a song by Shenstone that brings the section full circle:

Adieu, ye jovial youths, who join  
To plunge old Care in floods of wine;  
And, as your dazzled eye-balls roll,  
Discern him struggling in the bowl.

Not yet is hope so wholly flown,  
Not yet is thought so tedious grown,  
But limpid stream and shady tree,  
Retain, as yet, some sweets for me.

And see, through yonder silent grove,  
See yonder does my Daphne rove:  
With pride her foot-steps I purse,  
And bid your frantic joys adieu.

The sole confusion I admire,  
Is that my Daphnes [*sic*] eyes inspire:  
I scorn the madness you approve,  
And value Reason next to love. (77)

The closing vignette echoes the composition of the opening scene, though here one of the revellers rises to follow a distant woman into the sunlight.

Once love and drink have been exhausted as the subject of song, all else can be grouped under the heading of 'Miscellaneous Songs', and 'although no subdivision appeared necessary, or was, indeed, admissible, or even practicable, in these two last parts, the readers may yet perceive an attention to, and propriety in the arrangement and disposition of each, with which, it is presumed, he will not have reason to be displeased' (v). The 'Miscellaneous Songs' are, predictably, less

organized, though there are still intriguing juxtapositions. For example, the hunting song which Ritson so reluctantly included provides a turning point between descriptions of pastoral ease and human violence, so that, placed in this context, the exuberance of the hunters disrupts the comfortable calm of the previous songs and ushers in lurid descriptions of murder and punishment. Similarly, the ‘Ancient Ballads’, although they cover many topics, form a sequence. The ballads in this class begin with songs of love and violence, and culminate in simply violence, with ‘Chevy Chase’ given the place of honour to conclude the collection.

Ritson’s organization is unusual. He does not reject progress as an interpretive framework – it provides the subject for the ‘Historical Essay’ – but it is not central to the body of the collection itself. The process of selecting and organizing the contents of a collection reflected the assumptions of the editor, and could be used to guide the ways in which the texts included were received.

**‘To which is prefixed an Essay on the Origin and Progress of Song Writing’**

The ‘Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song’ which introduces the *Select Collection* both supports and complicates the understanding of ‘English Song’ developed through the structure of the collection itself. In addition to its literary potential, organization (or its absence) was a key feature of antiquarian writing. In her work on eighteenth-century antiquaries, Sweet defends antiquaries from the common satire of a disorganized and indiscriminate collector (of either a physical collection or a written work). The importance of organization was commonly discussed within antiquarian circles, as ‘these two issues – the need to digest and to interpret antiquities rather than to amass and admire, and the importance of providing the correct kind of scholarly apparatus – were repeatedly rehearsed by antiquaries throughout the eighteenth century’ (17). Writers such as Ritson faced this problem within the literary realm – once material had been collected, how should it be arranged and presented? Ritson struggled with this question throughout his career. Basic decisions had to be made about the scope of collections, their contents, and the ways in which they were presented and arranged. Within the introductory essays that accompanied each collection, very different

strategies were employed in more or less successful attempts to balance the need for an exhaustive demonstration of his research with some sort of structure.

The 'Historical Essay' has a deliberate and clear structure. It is divided into seven numbered sections, addressing 1. The universal and natural presence of song in primitive societies and its development in Greece, 2. The progress from the Greeks to the Romans, 3. The progress from the Romans to the romance languages, particularly Italian, 4. The 'progress of song amongst our Gallic neighbours', the French (xvii), 5. The progress of song in Spain, 6. The progress of song among the Celts, and 7. The progress of song among 'The Teutones or Goths, from whom we are to consider ourselves as mediately descended' (xxxix). As the final section approaches the period covered by the collection, it moves from a discussion of song in the abstract to songs, enumerating the major poets of each reign and evaluating their contributions to the genre.

In its structure and contents the 'Historical Essay' reinforces the use of the *Select Collection* to establish a national repository. Song is natural, universal, and nationally specific. In the early sections, Ritson presents his essay not as original research, but as a summary of generally accepted truths, heavily footnoted with reference to established authorities, particularly the works of Charles Burney and the 'Memoire sur la Chanson' by de Querlon, which introduces the *Anthologie Françoise*. The observation in the *Gentleman's Magazine* that Ritson was more familiar with black-letter than Greek was not unfounded. This portion of the essay, like the collection itself, does not claim to present new material, but to select and gather together extracts from other works into a new and illuminating configuration. 'All writers agree that Song is the most ancient species of poetry' he tells us, and 'Its origin is even thought to be coeval with mankind' (i). Song is so natural and universal, that it is found even among the 'savage tribes of America, at present', allowing Ritson the chance to suggest that they may have been corrupted, rather than civilized, by contact with Europeans and Christians.<sup>20</sup> Travellers' accounts of the

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<sup>20</sup> The sources of the 'The Death-Song of a Cherokee Indian' in the 'Historical Essay' are examined in detail by McLane, pp. 104-12. It is considered extensively by Tim Fulford in *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture 1765-1830*.

West Indies provide further insight into ‘the practice of mankind in the infancy of creation’ (iii). While song is universal, the emergence of nations leads to the emergence of national song, moving from a universal pastoral to praise of gods and heroes (once gods and heroes have been invented), so that ‘The most ancient nations of the world, The Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Arabians, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Asiatic Indians, are all known to have had the use of song .... Lyric or singing poetry has been, likewise, cultivated among the Chinese, time immemorial’ (iv). Ritson, however, is less concerned with China than with Greece, tracing song through history and myth, in an account largely derived from Burney’s *General History of Music*, before arriving at the Romans with the observation, quoted from Burney, that ‘What nature was to the Greeks, the Greeks were to the Romans’ (xiv). Romans very quickly give way to romance, to Dante and the *Decameron*, and then to ‘the progress of Song amongst our Gallic neighbours; and here, at least, we shall have no reason to complain of a scarcity of materials’ (xvii). Ritson largely derives his account from recent French historians of song, deferentially presenting a long quotation by de Querlon, ‘the spirited and judicious author so often cited in the margin’ as the conclusion to the section (xxviii). Spanish is approached in much the same way, here derived from Sarmiento’s *Memorias para la historia de la poesia, y poetas Espan’oles* (1775). As with de Querlon, Sarmiento is given the last word on Spanish song. Ritson places the *Select Collection* within an international context, in which each country is busy establishing its own history and canon, and England (and eventually Scotland) must do the same.

For Ritson, in this essay, nationality, national character and national song largely derive from language. Moving from the romance languages to the Celts, he explains:

In an enquiry regarding the genius and language of the Italians, the French, and the Spaniards, one is naturally led to place them next to the Romans, on account of their more intimate and peculiar connections with that nation, without paying much attention to the origin of the people themselves: a particular to which we shall in the remainder of this slight essay, attempt to adhere.

That the Celts, a most ancient and extensive European nation, of whose origin and early history we are entirely ignorant, and from whom the Welsh, the Irish, and the Scottish-highlanders claim to be descended, had songs among them, is a circumstance of which, had there been no direct evidence to the fact, we could scarcely have doubted. (xxxiv-xxxv)

Ritson's identification of language and culture, rather than ancestry, as the significant object of study was further developed in the preface to his *Scotish Songs*, placing him in conflict with the increasingly racialized understanding of history exemplified by Pinkerton (who cared very much about 'the origin of the people theirselves').

Tracing the history of the British bards, Ritson emphasizes their contemporary relevance, noting that 'The Welsh still celebrate the names of Taliesin, Lywarch Hên, and others, bards who flourished in the sixth century, and of whose works they have, at this day, considerable remains', mentioning the recent publications of Evan Evans (xxxv). He notes the persecution of the bards by 'our Edward I', 'an event which has been immortalized by the sublime genius of the English Pindar' (xxxv). He touches briefly on the highlands and Ossian ('undoubtedly very ingenious, artful, and, it may be, elegant compositions, but they are certainly not genuine'), before moving to ancient Ireland, where 'the bards are no where known to have been treated with more respect, or held in higher estimation', with the observation that the bards had become unruly by the time of Spenser (xxxvi). While he had been dismissive of songs written in English in Ireland in the preface, he notes the beauty and elegance of contemporary Irish poetry, although he must rely on translations (xxxviii). Ritson offers a suggestive understanding of a shared Celtic past uniting Wales, Ireland, and the highlands and islands of Scotland, one strongly associated with (historically contained) insurrection and contemporary works. He writes from the perspective of English readers, and there is a clear 'us' and 'them', confirmed as he moves to the next section:

Having taken this cursory view of the melody and song of the Celtic nations, we shall now turn back to enquire into their existence among the Teutones or Goths, from whom we are to consider ourselves as mediately descended' (xxxix)

Ritson notes the mythology of the ancient Germans, though ‘of the poetical genius and history of the modern Germans little can be collected’, touches briefly on Greenlanders and Russians, and unsurprisingly does not know what to make of the Finns. He sketches a history not unlike Percy’s, in which the Icelandic Scalds are the counterparts of the Celtic bards, and in his discussion of Ragnar Lodbrog cites Percy as an authority (xli).

He identifies the Saxons as a ‘mixture of Germans and Danes’ and claims them as ‘our Pagan ancestors’, lamenting the scarcity of evidence of their ‘genius, manners and amusements’ before the conversion to Christianity. He gathers what little evidence he can of Saxon poetry, concluding that

It is not unreasonable to attribute the suppression of the romantic poems and popular songs of the Saxons, to the monks, who seem not only to have refused to commit them to writing, which few others were capable of doing, but to have given no quarter to any thing of the kind which fell into their hands....What advantages Christianity brought them, how much it enlightened their understandings, or improved their morals, to counterbalance the destruction of their national genius and spirit, is not, perhaps, at this distance of time, altogether so easy to be discovered. (xlv)

However, it is only with the Conquest that English can be said to properly begin. Although he hypothesises that the Saxon tongue continued for some time, gradually mixing with the Norman, until the reign of Henry III, ‘the written dialect we meet toward the end of his time, being essentially a different tongue: from this uncertain period, therefor, we date the birth and establishment of the English language’ (xlvii). As in his ‘Descent of the Crown’, Ritson traces a present derived from the past, yet characterized as much by disruption as continuity.

From this point forward, Ritson is on much firmer ground, and can begin to demonstrate his command of the surviving evidence of early English works. He inserts the song beginning ‘sumer is icumen in’, noting that both John Hawkins and Burney had printed the text, but challenges, in a restrained and respectful manner, their dating of it to the fifteenth century, correctly attributing it to the thirteenth (less charitably he points out that Warton borrowed from Hawkins without

acknowledgement, reproducing his errors) (xlvi-xlvii). The language of the song is treated as sufficiently strange that it is printed in type that mimics the script of the manuscript, and a translation is provided in a footnote. He offers a description of the relevant contents of Harley 2253, providing the song beginning 'Bytuene mersh & aueril' as an example of 'the language and poetic manner of this early period' (xlvii-xlviii). From this point forward, the essay becomes a catalogue of the surviving texts with brief evaluative judgements. Chaucer provides many allusions to songs and singing, but no songs worth including, while the reign of Henry VI is 'an æra of great consequence in the poetical annals of this country; not so much, indeed, from the excellence, as from the magnitude and multiplicity of its metrical productions' (l). The most significant productions are 'two songs or ballads, in a rude Northern dialect, which deserve particular attention' – *The Battle of Otterburn* and *Chevy Chase* (l). All of which leads, inevitably, to Percy's minstrels.

In the essay which introduces the first volume of the *Reliques* 'On the Ancient English Minstrels', Percy developed a complex theory of a class of medieval English minstrels descended from Scandinavian skalds (and thus court-poets who recorded the history of their patrons) and held in high regard. Ritson concedes Percy's description of the high esteem in which the French minstrels were held, noting that he had dealt with them in a similar manner earlier in the essay: 'Without attempting to controvert the slightest fact laid down by the learned prelate, one may be well permitted to question the propriety of his inferences, and, indeed his general hypothesis' (lii). Whatever the status of the French minstrels, even in England, 'French or Norman minstrels, however, are not English ones' (lii). While French was the 'polite language of the court and country', the English minstrels were, by the time of Elizabeth, beggars and vagabonds, and any evidence of their compositions is entirely absent (liii). This is the entirety of Ritson's quarrel with Percy's minstrels.

After this interruption, the essay continues with the enumeration of the surviving songs. Skelton's songs, despite his prominence as a poet, are either 'too gross to be endured' or 'too insipid to be regarded', while unfortunately nothing by Surrey or Wyatt can be called a song (liv, lv). It is only with the reign of Elizabeth that 'we are to look for the origin of the modern English song; not a single composition of that nature, with the smallest degree of poetical merit, being



discoverable at any preceding period; and, consequently, none earlier is to be found in the collection herewith given to the public' (lvi). Ritson's investigation into English song, in the 'Historical Essay' and the collection, is notably literary. Here he connects the songs which he selected, and those which he omitted, into a chronological narrative, distinguishing between a literary tradition of lyric poetry (which may have had a tune when it was composed or had one or more set sometime later) and a popular ballad tradition. The former includes Marlowe, Spenser, Drayton, Shakespeare, Sidney, Vere, Edwards, Gascoigne, Breton and other lesser known poets; the latter were widely distributed in print by booksellers and can rarely be attributed to authors (lvi-lix). Although songs may originate and circulate within an oral culture, it is only when they are written, and circulate in manuscript and print, that they can become the object of antiquarian study, as practiced by Ritson at this time. Ballads, for the purposes of this collection, are approached in the same manner:

That the common people of this, like those of almost every other country, have, always, even in their rudest state, had songs to celebrate or record national or local occurrences, by whomever they may have been composed, is an incontrovertible fact. Unfortunately, however, of these pieces not more than two, both already noticed, are known to exist. (lvii)

Ritson retains some hope that more written records of early ballads will be found, expressing an earnest wish to trade the 'ponderous tomes of Lydgate and Occleve' for some trace of 'the vulgar songs composed and sung during the civil wars of York and Lancaster' (lviii). This once again brings him into conflict with Percy, as he challenges Percy's attribution of many of his texts to 'a very remote antiquity; an antiquity altogether incompatible with the stile and language of the compositions themselves, most of which, one may be allowed to say, bear the strongest intrinsic marks of a *very* modern date' (lviii). As in his conflicts with Warton, Ritson claims the expertise necessary to date texts on the basis of internal evidence. Each successive reign is given a brief description, until Ritson arrives at the present day. He identifies some authors as worthy of special praise: Dryden is 'undoubtedly great in every species of poetry'; 'Mrs. Behn deserves a more particular acknowledgement'; 'Congreve, gay, spritely, and licentious, too frequently suffered

his wit to surprise his judgement'; 'Gay, the accomplished, the inimitable Gay, is the ornament' of the reign of George I; 'The name of Pope will shed a lustre over the long reign of George II'; 'the beautiful songs of Lyttelton resemble the gentle murmurs of the turtle'; 'Moore is one of the most pleasing and natural of our song writers'; 'Dr. Percy, now Bishop of Dromore, the editor of, and author of some pieces in the *Reliques of ancient English Poetry*, so frequently noticed has, independent of his contributions to that work, favoured the public with one most beautiful song'; although in general 'The cultivation and improvement of song is not among the blessings of the present reign', with the exceptions of Goldsmith, Cunningham, Barbauld, Sheridan and a few others (lvi-lxix).

When Warton began his research into the early periods of English literary history, he considered a number of different forms. In 'Antiquarianism, Balladry and the Rehabilitation of Romance', Susan Manning describes how 'the traditional activities of material antiquarianism' and 'its literary manifestation in ballad collection and the eighteenth-century retrieval of "romance"' fit uneasily with eighteenth-century models of history (49). Despite providing the "raw materials" for higher forms of history, antiquarianism's uncertain conceptual placing and primary rationale in the accumulation of material without subordination to system or theory rendered its implications ideologically promiscuous and therefore politically suspect' (49). Each of the forms that Warton considered navigated these tensions in different ways, striking different balances between overarching narrative and discrete texts. In the form that he eventually chose, the *History of English Poetry*, lengthy extracts from discrete poems were, nominally, included as support for a narrative, although as many readers have found, his enthusiasm for his texts sometimes overwhelmed the structure of his narrative. Ritson attacked Warton on the grounds established by his chosen form, challenging his authority to mediate his texts through his glosses, and demonstrating that his chosen extracts did not function as evidence or illustration for his narrative argument.

The form which Percy used in the *Reliques of English Poetry*, and which Ritson used in the *Select Collection*, was quite different. The form of a selected and edited collection of complete texts, with an introductory essay, provided a way to present both discrete texts and a carefully constructed narrative argument, each

influencing and guiding the interpretation of the other. The selection of texts could serve as evidence and illustration of the argument made in the essay, while the essay might provide the necessary background to understand the texts, with a great deal of theoretical and interpretive decisions hidden in the identification of what, exactly, was understood to be the necessary background. Percy's engagement with medieval texts was largely conducted through the essays which introduced sections of the *Reliques* rather than the texts of the collection. The relationship between the introductory essay and the collection itself could vary considerably, with the essays sometimes enjoying an independent existence. For example, the essays which introduced the different sections of the *Reliques* were later published separately, as *Four Essays as Improved and Enlarged in the Second Edition of the Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1767). The portion of Ritson's 'historical essay' which dealt with English song was published separately, under Ritson's name, in *The European Magazine and London Review* as 'A Historical View of English Song, from the Conquest to the Present Time', taking on a different function and significance in a new context, although textually identical (with the exception of regularized spelling). The *Anthologie Française* on which Ritson drew heavily for the earlier portions of that essay, was introduced by 'Memoire sur la Chanson' by de Querlon, while the anthology as a whole was produced by Jean Monnet. In the 'Historical Essay on Scottish Song' which introduces his *Scottish Songs*, Ritson makes several references to William Tytler's 'ingenious but fanciful *Dissertation on the Scottish Music*', noting that it is printed in at least four different contexts:

1. at the end of Arnot's *History of Edinburgh*, 1779; 2. with the *Poetical remains of James I.* 1783; 3. by way of preface to Napier's *Collection of Scots Songs*; and, lastly, in the *Transactions of the society of the antiquaries of Scotland*, 1792. (xxxiv)

The same essay might serve different roles in each context. Robert Cromek's *Select Scottish Songs, Ancient and Modern* (1810), in which the account of Ritson's death was included as an appendix, was formed by taking pre-existing commentary by Robert Burns from a variety of sources, which had been previously collected by Cromek in *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1809), and then identifying and collecting the songs to which that commentary could serve as an introduction. Cromek argues that

‘in performing this task, the Editor conceives he shall accomplish a two-fold object; for while the Songs acquire additional interest from the criticism of so eminent a Poet, the Remarks themselves will be better appreciated when prefixed to the subjects on which they are grounded’ (i). Combined, each element changes and guides the reception of the others.

The possibilities offered by the form of the edited collection are demonstrated in the critiques Ritson makes of Percy. Ritson makes two distinct attacks on Percy. In his preface, he attacks Percy as an editor, identifying the ways in which Percy’s texts deviated from his named sources, using that attack to establish his own editorial practice. In his essay, he attacks Percy as an essayist, challenging the evidence he offers in support of his minstrel theory in the ‘Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels’, which introduces the first volume of the *Reliques*. Yet it was the combination of these sins that was particularly egregious. The sophisticated or misdated texts function as illustration or evidence of Percy’s narrative of literary history, while the poorly constructed essay offers a misleading framework for understanding the later texts. Considered in isolation, the ‘Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels’ is simply a bad essay, painting a false image of medieval English minstrels. When it serves as an introduction of a selection of early modern ballads, suggesting that they be read as the continuation and confirmation of a non-existent tradition, it becomes something more insidious.

As the reviewers noted, the *Select Collection of English Songs* provides exactly what it promises. It is a complex work, one which reflects deliberate decisions about what role the collection should serve and what audience was aimed at. All the features of the collection – the ‘Historical Essay’, the printing of the music, the engraved vignettes, the selection and organization of the texts, the collation and considered modernization of the texts, the preface which called attention to some of these features – combine to achieve Ritson’s ‘complex object’.

## Chapter 4: Ancient Songs

### ‘the progressive energies of the trivial Muse’

In the *Select Collection of English Songs*, Ritson made several decisions about the nature of the work and its intended audience. Although he emphasized the antiquarian research that underpinned the collections, it was not itself an antiquarian work for an antiquarian audience. He made different decisions for his other works. *Ancient Songs from the Time of King Henry the Third to the Revolution* (1790) is in many ways a continuation of the *Select Collection*, shifting the focus from the selection of the best English songs to a study of ‘ancient’ English songs, with differences in the criteria for selection and editorial principles as a consequence. The collection of *Ancient Songs* marked a decisive antiquarian turn in Ritson’s published work. It was followed by two other collections which reflected similar ideas: *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry: From Authentic Manuscripts and Old Printed Copies* (1791) and *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to That Celebrated English Outlaw: To Which Are Prefixed Historical Anecdotes of His Life* (1795). Although the latter has since become one of Ritson’s most frequently reprinted and studied collections, it was initially planned and received as a companion to the *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry*. The first section of this chapter will examine the *Ancient Songs*, exploring the ways in which Ritson chose to present his ‘ancient’ texts. The second section will consider the two later collections together, demonstrating the similar ways in which they were planned and received. The third will address *Robin Hood*, demonstrating how this influential work can be understood in its immediate context.

The ‘Advertisement’ to the *Ancient Songs* notes that ‘The favourable attention which the public has constantly shewn to works illustrating the history, the poetry, the language, the manners, or the amusements of their ancestors, and particularly to such as have professed to give any of the remains of the lyric compositions’, frankly announcing that:

The reader must not expect to find, among the pieces here preserved, either the interesting fable, or the romantic wildness of a late elegant publication. But, in whatever light they may exhibit the lyric powers of our ancient Bards, they will at least have the recommendation of

evident and indisputable authenticity: the sources from which they have been derived will be faithfully referred to, and are, in general, public and accessible.

Whatever else the songs may be (or not be), they are undoubtedly accurate, a ‘small but genuine collection of Ancient Songs and Ballads’. The collection is introduced with two introductory works, ‘Observations on the Ancient English Minstrels’, in which Ritson expands on his disagreements with Percy, collecting every scrap of information he can on the English minstrels to demonstrate that Percy’s assertions are unfounded and voicing his scepticism about Percy’s Folio, and the longer ‘Dissertation on the Songs, Music, and Vocal and Instrumental Performance of the Ancient English’.

Contemporary reviewers connected the work to the *English Songs*, reflecting on the different subject and audience. The reviewer for the *Monthly Review* notes:

The editor of this compilation is, it seems, already known to the public as a man of taste and information, by a selection of English songs formerly published, with an interesting preliminary discourse, and reviewed in our seventy-third volume. The present undertaking has not so much for its object the preservation of the excellent, as of the curious. It rather contains documents for the history of song-writing, than the master pieces of the art. It aims not, like the elegant anthology of Aikin, at illustrating a theory of this species of composition by well-chosen examples, but at recording the progressive energies of the trivial Muse. Among the learned in black literature, the editor, (Mr. Ritson, as we presume,) stands high. If to be more veracious than Percy, and more industrious than Warton, be praise, – to him this praise belongs. If to have only fallen short of the punctuality of Malone, of the judgement of Steevens, and of the erudition of Tyrwhitt, be honor sufficient, as undoubtedly it is, for this too he may produce some pretension. (178)

Ritson had sought to establish a reputation for himself through his early works, and he evidently had done so (the reviewer for the *Critical Review* identifies him as ‘the remarker on Warton’ (283)). Responses to Ritson were often cumulative, evaluating

each new work in the light of his established reputation. The reviews of 1790, although often ambivalent, offer a very different picture than that promoted by the *British Critic* and Percy after Ritson's death. Ritson is known to be 'a man of taste and information', and an acknowledged expert in early printed material. He is 'veracious' and 'industrious', but those skills are not everything.

The 'Dissertation' which introduces the *Ancient Songs* begins with a disclaimer:

To pretend to frame a History, or anything resembling one, from the scanty gleanings it is possible to collect upon the subject of our Ancient Songs and vulgar music, would be vain and ridiculous. To bring under one view the little fragments and slight notices which casually offer themselves in the course of extensive reading, and sometimes where they are least likely to occur, may possibly serve to gratify a sympathetic curiosity, which is all here aimed at; and when so little is professed, there can scarcely be reason to complain of disappointment. (xxvii)

Throughout the 'Dissertation', Ritson gathers every scrap of information available, describing not only any songs that he was able to find in his extensive research, but any reference to singing or instruments that can be found in any other works.

However, throughout the work he provides constant reminders of the gaps in the material he has assembled, the frustrating lack of definitive evidence. People must have sung, but what they sung has not been recovered. He concludes with the declaration that:

This slight and imperfect essay ought not to be concluded without a wish that they who are in possession of curiosities of this nature, for almost every song prior to the commencement of the last century is a curiosity, would contrive some method or other of making them public, or at least of acquainting us with their existence, and thereby preserving them from that destruction to which they are otherwise to exceedingly liable. With respect to the collection now produced, there is scarce a public library which has not been explored, in order to furnish material for it. Its contents, indeed, are far from numerous; a

defect, if it be one, which neither zeal nor industry has been able to remedy. (lxxvi)

Ritson's essay is inevitably 'imperfect' but it is hardly 'slight'. The resources of 'public libraries' have been exhausted, and further additions must rely on private owners making their collections public in some manner. Ritson's concern with evidence demands that his research emphasize the material production and survival of early works. He observes that 'the number of ancient printed songs and ballads which have perished must be considerable', due to their circulation in single sheets, as 'the practice of collecting them into books, did not take place till after queen Elizabeths time' (lxxiii). Consequently, 'Those pieces which we now call old ballads, such as Fair Rosamond, The Children of the Wood, and the Ladys Fall' are in fact 'comparatively modern' (lxxiv). Ritson is, by necessity, restricted to the material survival of works in manuscript or print. He remarks, somewhat wryly, that 'It is barely possible that something of the kind may be still preserved in the country by tradition. The Editor has frequently heard of traditional songs, but has had very little success in his endeavours to hear the songs themselves' (lxxv).

Ritson follows very different editorial principles for the *Ancient Songs* than he had done for the more elegant *English Songs*. He scrupulously, even ostentatiously, preserves the orthography of his sources, including obsolete characters and abbreviations. Not only does he retain the use of thorn, but he distinguishes between the earlier use of the character with a long ascender and the later forms lacking the ascender. This was a mode of printing better suited to texts offered as historical evidence than literary pleasure, foregrounding the authority derived from the material source. He prints music with the text only when his authority does so. In the case of 'A Song or Catch in Praise of the Cuckow', or 'Sumer is icumen in', Ritson's printed text mimics as closely as is feasible the manuscript, reproducing the medieval notation and the layout of the page (3-4). The *Critical Review*, largely concerned with defending Percy, remarked that 'We cannot approve of the editor's mode of printing the ancient songs, with the contractions of the original MSS. If he must be so pedantic, it would be preferable to give us plates in facsimile' (289). Facsimile editions of manuscripts of historical importance were produced at the time, although they were technologically challenging and expensive



to create. Sweet describes the work by the Society of Antiquaries to produce a facsimile of the *Domesday Book*, including debates over whether it would be best to engrave copper plates or cut a specially designed typeface to mimic the appearance of the manuscript (*Antiquaries* 282). While the *English Songs* had simply assured readers that all available sources had been consulted and collated, the *Ancient Songs* prefaced each song with a headnote describing the sources, their location, and any discussion of the text in other works, as Percy had done in his *Reliques*, apologizing for ‘too great a parade of his authorities’ (xii). As Bronson concludes, ‘The book is not so much a bid for Percy’s laurels as an object lesson, to teach Percy how he should have done his work on the *Reliques*’ (176).

It is in the collection of *Ancient Songs* that Ritson’s years in the British Museum finally take centre stage. The eighty-eight texts are arranged chronologically, from ‘Sumer is icumen in’ to a contemporary response to the revolution. The texts which were confined to the background of the ‘Historical Essay’ in the collection of *English Songs* are here printed in full, often for the first time. In some cases, Ritson takes the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to date his texts, beginning by reiterating the assignment of ‘Sumer is icumen in’ to at least 1250 (2). He takes ‘Azeyn me will I take me leue’ from the Vernon Manuscript, declaring that it was ‘in a character which the editor conjectured, on looking over it, to be of the fourteenth century (i.e. of the reign of Edward III. or Richard II.)’ (44). Other dates are more complex. ‘Robin Lyth’ is taken from Sloane 2593. Ritson establishes that the manuscript is in ‘a hand which appears to be nearly, if not quite, as old as the time of Henry V. But from the uncommon rudeness of the following extract, which is totally dissimilar in point of language and manner to any thing the editor has hitherto met with, one may safely venture to pronounce it at least of equal date with the commencement of the preceding reign’, and so places it at that point in his sequence (48-49). Ritson is well aware of the complications of scribal culture, and the challenges it poses to the use of these texts to construct a historical narrative. He is far more cautious than his contemporaries when arguing that a surviving material witness can be used to represent a text composed much earlier, as Percy did with his Folio manuscript, making reasoned and well-supported arguments when he does so.

Ritson draws his texts from the collections of the British Museum, the Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library, the Ashmolean Museum and privately owned printed works. Ritson's requests of Harley 2253 have been discussed above. In addition to that manuscript, which provides eight of the earliest texts, Ritson consulted Harley 978, 913, 7333, 5396, 2252, 3362, 7578, 3889, 5511; Sloane 2593, 1584, 1708, 1489; Vespasian.A.XXV, B.XVI, and Titus.A.XXVI. In several instances, the 'Register' records that these works were requested together or in sequences, demonstrating the periods during which Ritson was most focused on the collection of *Ancient Songs*. This was the product of many years of extensive and deliberate research.

In the final selection, 'The Belgick Boar, to the old tune of Chevy-Chase' Ritson draws a connection between the past and present, anticipating an argument that he would make elaborately in his *Robin Hood* collection:

As this collection is brought down to and closed by the Revolution, it was thought not improper to conclude it with a relation of that celebrated event by some minstrel or ballad-maker of the time. The following Song (though not printed, it would seem, till some years after, the white-letter sheet from which it is given being dated at London 1695) has been judged as curious and interesting as any; and, as it is apparently written with all the fidelity and candour with which a party matter could be well represented, will doubtless meet the readers approbation.

It will be in vain for the public to expect a faithful narrative of this equally intricate and important affair, so long as the historian may, by speaking the truth, subject himself to fine and imprisonment, at the arbitrary will of a prejudiced and unfeeling judge\*. That the most opposite sentiments are entertained of it is evident from its being extolled by one party as the most exalted effort of human action, or rather the operation of Almighty power; while it is classed by an eminent writer, who unquestionably spoke the sense of another, among "the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy,

perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, malice and ambition could produce.”

After all, it cannot be denied that the ballad now reprinted has been treated as a libel, and a person indicted and punished for barely having it in his custody. See the case of the King versus Beare, Carthews Reports, p. 407. See also “Another letter to Mr. Almon in matter of libel;” a subject upon which there is no difference between a Holt and a Scroggs.

\* Refer to the sentence of the two Woodfalls, a few years since, for inadvertently publishing a paper signed “A South Briton.”

Ritson, in the *Ancient Songs*, is constructing a history, ostensibly one concerned with the changes to language and verse over about six hundred years. Yet the materials he has are limited to what survives, and what could be written, could be circulated, and could be preserved was subject to severe constraint. Ritson refers to the case of R v. Bear of 1699, which set the precedent that the judgement of whether the content of a text (in this case, the ‘Belgick Boar’) was libellous would be made by a judge and not a jury, and on much broader grounds than had previously been recognized (Bird 57). This precedent had a direct impact on the more recent trials of Almon and the Woodfalls (61). The ‘Belgick Boar’ itself is an unashamedly partisan work, yet even a purportedly neutral historian is hampered by the political demands of the moment. As he had done in the ‘Descent of the Crown’, Ritson is concerned with the Glorious Revolution as an event that cannot ever be accurately described, as too much in the present is at stake. He adds to this a growing concern with the risks that publishers and authors faced.

Like the *English Songs*, the *Ancient Songs* is a deliberately and carefully constructed work, offering a different selection of texts (although there is some overlap in the periods and even the authors covered), arranged and edited in a different manner and to a different end. While the *English Songs* scrupulously avoided bawdy songs and political songs, both are included in the *Ancient Songs*, the latter with explanatory notes. The two works had very different afterlives in the nineteenth century, inversely correlated to their reception when they first appeared. The *English Songs* was an elegant work designed to appeal to a contemporary

audience, and so was quickly dated, as it competed against many similar works designed on similar principles. By the early nineteenth century, the taste for ancient literature had developed somewhat. Frank edited a new edition of the *Ancient Songs* in 1829, adding material from his uncle's manuscripts and notes, but modernizing the orthography. Frank modifies the choices Ritson made in organizing his research, reclassifying the class of ballads from the *English Songs* as ancient texts and incorporating them into a combined collection of *Ancient Songs and Ballads*. A third edition, building upon Frank's work, was edited by W. C. Hazlitt in 1877.

**'a superannuated domestic'**

The *Ancient Songs* was followed by *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry: From Authentic Manuscripts and Old Printed Copies. Adorned with Cuts* (1791). Unlike most of Ritson's collections, it is not equipped with an introductory essay. However, it has an intriguing 'Preface', making a spirited argument for attention to (and affection for) ancient ballads. Ritson offers an unusual elaboration upon the common conceit of an earlier age as the childhood of a nation:

The genius which has been successfully exerted in contributing to the instruction or amusement of society, in even the rudest times, seems to have some claim upon its gratitude for protection in more enlightened ones. It is a superannuated domestic, whose passed services entitle his old age to a comfortable provision and retreat; or rather, indeed, a humble friend, whose attachment in adverse circumstances demands the warm and grateful acknowledgements [*sic*] of prosperity. (v)

Even if society has outgrown its former companions, they are still owed gratitude and appreciation. Moreover, he argues, writers of taste and genius do not spring forth 'like Minerva out of the head of Jupiter, at full growth, and mature', but build upon earlier efforts (vi). In some cases, particularly Shakespeare, these are known and well-studied, but in others they have been lost (vi).

The 'Preface' to *Ancient Popular Poetry* acknowledges that 'the intelligent reader' might be surprised that 'nothing should occur upon a subject indisputably the most popular of all – the history of our renowned English archer, Robin Hood' (x).

The absence is easily explained, as ‘the poems, ballads, and historical or miscellaneous matter, in existence, relative to this celebrated outlaw, are sufficient to furnish the contents of even a couple of volumes considerably bulkier than the present; and fully deserve to appear in a separate publication, “unmix’d with baser matter”’ (x). Records kept by the Bewicks suggest that Ritson had initially planned to include a Robin Hood ballad in the earlier collection. ‘Robin Hood and the Tinker’ had been among the wood engraving commissioned for the earlier work in 1787, and paid for by Joseph Johnson in 1788 (Tattersfield 514-515). In 1789, Ritson commissioned ten engravings for the *Robin Hood* collection, accepting and paying for six of these in 1790 (588). The project languished and was revived in 1792, when John Bewick received a commission for the remaining illustrations (589). Although the *Robin Hood* collection proved much more popular and influential, both collections originated as a part of the same project, and reflect the same sensibility.

In both collections, Ritson’s editorial decisions follow a middle ground between those he had made in the *English* and *Ancient* songs. Each text is given a more or less elaborate textual headnote, describing the source text or texts, the location of surviving copies where relevant, and possibly any references to the text in other works. In both collections, Ritson abandons the near facsimile of the *Ancient Songs*, explaining in the ‘Preface’ to *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* that:

It is not the editors inclination to enter more at large into the nature or merits of the poems he has here collected. The originals have fallen in his way on various occasions, and the pleasing recollection of the happiest period of which most of them were the familiar acquaintance, has induced him to give them to the public with a degree of elegance, fidelity and correctness, seldom instanced in republications of greater importance. Every poem is printed from the authority refered [*sic*] to, with no other intentional license than was occasioned by the disuse of contractions, and a regular systematical punctuation, or became necessary by the errors of the original, which are generally, if not uniformly, noticed in the margin, the emendation being at the same time distinguished in the text. (xii-xiii)

In both collections, each text is provided with an opening vignette and tailpiece, from a wood engraving by either Thomas or John Bewick. The format evokes the long tradition of woodcuts with cheap broadside ballads and garlands, while the scrupulous reproduction of his sources reproduces the appearance of the early print material. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the accurate reproduction of the popular source makes a claim for the value and prestige of the current publication – these are appropriate subjects for a serious and elegant scholarly production.

Reviewers disagreed. The *Monthly Review* declares that the editorial approach of *Ancient Popular Poetry* is inappropriate for the material:

The first piece in this volume is the well-known ballad of Adam Bel, Clym of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley, here republished for the insignificant purpose of immortalizing the *true* readings of Copland's black-letter copy. In reprinting such an author as Shakspeare, it is no doubt an object to retain the original reading, wherever it can be ascertained; because the chance is, that such reading, when understood, will appear preferable to the imaginary emendations of his early editors: – but, in a two-penny ballad, with no Rowley for its author, the chance will always be, that Dr. Percy's reading is preferable to the *true one*, and should therefore remain undisturbed. (73-74)

This review is, comparatively, generally positive. The texts are interesting and entertaining, and 'ushered into the world with much typographical elegance, and enriched with introductions which betray no common hand', but simply undeserving of the level of serious attention with which their editor approaches them. The standards of textual scholarship that had developed for writers such as Shakespeare, as outlined by Walsh, were inappropriate for other kinds of texts, when there could be no question of recovering authorial genius. Ritson had collated his authorities carefully to establish the 'true' reading, but that was not necessarily a task worth doing.

The *Critical Review* is harsher. The work as a whole is reflective of the common fault of antiquaries, to lavish attention on trash. As in other reviews, Ritson is considered in the light of his previous publications:

The editor of the present collection, in his remarks on Mr. Warton's History of English Poetry, displayed some uncommon reading, chiefly indeed in romances, and other dull and neglected books. Dr. Percy was the next object of his censure, in the Preface to some Ancient Songs: but Warton and Percy are at last revenged. The petulance of a critic has by degrees evaporated in the insipidity of an editor. If we except William of Cloudesley, already published by Dr. Percy, and which our present editor has exerted all due pains to cloath again in uncouth dullness, there is not one piece in this collection which a man of taste or sense would not be ashamed to publish, or even to say he has read; so puerile, so childish are these old rhymes! (56)

Ritson's stated plans to publish the Robin Hood ballads is met with scorn – 'It is impossible to retain any degree of gravity, when we are told that the refuse of a stall is to be published "unmixed with baser matter"' (57). While the *Monthly Review* was intrigued by 'The Life and Death of Tom Thumbe', due to its connections with Arthurian material, the *Critical Review* dismissed it with mock incredulity: 'The Life and Death of Tom Thumbe! A ballad for the nursery' (57). The contents and their presentation, the reviewer argues, are perversely mismatched, for the illustrations are admirable, and 'While many of the classics have been published in this country in a slovenly manner, it is with pain we observe that this collection of trash is printed in a superior style, upon excellent woven, or, as the French more properly term it, vellum paper' (57-58). As with his later works, reviews are divided between those who argue that the work should have been done differently, preferably by someone else, and that it should not have been undertaken at all.

*Robin Hood* faced many of the same criticisms as *Ancient Popular Poetry*. The *British Critic*, after dealing with the radical politics, as will be discussed below, argued that by accurately reproducing the printed ballads Ritson had merely succeeded in producing a very expensive ballad garland (at 10s 6d for two octavo volumes):

In truth, we wanted something like an elegant or classical edition of these popular songs, the delight of our childhood, and the amusement of the great mass of the people: and nothing could have been more

acceptable than such a collection of them, as, by ingenious conjectural emendations where necessary, would have left them in such a state that they could be read with pleasure; and admitted on the shelves of an elegant library; something like what hath been done for the ballads of Fair Rosamond, and the Abbot of Canterbury, in the *Reliques of ancient Poetry*. But this erroneous mass of trash disgraces his first and better volume; and, if we might advise, should at once be cancelled, or consigned to the vulgar walls, as only a new edition of *Robin Hood's Garland*. (21)

After more than a decade of sustained attack, Ritson had succeeded in bringing the sophistication of Percy's *Reliques* to the surface of critical debate, acknowledged and defended, but not denied. The *Critical Review*, after mocking the idea of a patriotic Robin Hood, merely notes that 'The poems are not proper subjects for criticism' (229).

**'the best that could be had'**

*Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads Now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw: To Which are Prefixed Historical Anecdotes of His Life* is in many ways a more elaborate work than the *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry*. As the title promised, it was an exhaustive collection: 'a collection of *all* the ancient poems, songs, and ballads now extant' (emphasis mine). The body of the two volume octavo collection consists of thirty-three texts, arranged in roughly chronological order, from the early sixteenth-century 'Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode', printed by Wynkn de Worde, to the contents of the contemporary ballad garlands, each text provided with a vignette by John or Thomas Bewick. As a collection of ballads relating to Robin Hood, Ritson's collection would not be superseded until Francis James Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* was published at the end of the nineteenth century, and it continued to be consulted,



in one form or another, as a resource for the study of Robin Hood well into the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

The collection contains considerably more than ballads. The ‘historical anecdotes of his life’ are eclectic, eccentric, and exhaustive, as Ritson compiles every scrap of information that can be found, including detailed descriptions of Robin Hood’s appearances in chronicles, drama, proverbs, and the stories attached to local landmarks in an attempt to establish the biography of a historical Robin Hood. Ritson presents his materials in two parts: a concise ‘Life of Robin Hood’ and ‘Notes and Illustrations Referred to in the Foregoing Life’ (xiv). The ‘Life’ is brief: eleven pages, one of which is devoted entirely to a quotation from Drayton. It offers a seemingly authoritative biography of a historical Robin Hood. This Robin Hood was born at Locksley in 1160, his true name was Robert Fitzooth, he could claim the title of the Earl of Huntingdon, he was outlawed for debt, retreated to the forest, where he was joined by Little John, William Scadlock, George a Green, Much, Tuck, and Marian, and lived as ‘an independent sovereign’ until he was betrayed and died, in the year 1247 (v-xi). However, every authoritative statement is accompanied by a note – in the most crucial passages, there is a note for every full stop, and sometimes more, and the ‘Notes and Illustrations’ fill over a hundred pages. Every statement blossoms into a complex and tangled web of evidence, often contradictory and unsatisfactory. Ritson’s researches are, as he promises, extensive.

Although the interpretive frameworks have changed considerably, surprisingly little has been added to the present day. When, in 2015, Stephen Basdeo, a PhD student from Leeds, identified a previously unstudied early eighteenth-century satirical ballad, a tweet announcing the find read: ‘not even Ritson knew about this one’. In his collection, the ‘Life’, and the ‘Notes and Illustrations’, Ritson is

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<sup>21</sup> Dobson and Taylor’s *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (1976) begins with the reflection that, despite a recent increase in attention from historians and literary critics, ‘the sources on which all tales of Robin Hood ultimately depend have often been allowed to remain in a quite unnecessary obscurity, and are accessible only in the large and at times outdated collections of Joseph Ritson and Francis Child’, a deficiency rectified with their collection (ix). In their introduction, they note that ‘Joseph Ritson’s notes to his *Robin Hood* (1795 and later editions) still remain unsurpassed as a guide to the Robin Hood legend in the early modern period’, and readers are occasionally referred there for more information (37).

primarily concerned with collecting all extant material, evaluating and organizing it into some sort of structure, however inadequate, while transparently and accurately documenting his sources. However, Ritson's collection was also the product of an atheist and political radical in an intensely politically charged period, and in many ways he promotes a radical reading of the 'celebrated English outlaw', one not lost on contemporary reviewers (i). As will be demonstrated, Ritson presents Robin Hood as an avowed enemy of a corrupt and hypocritical clergy, and uses the description of miraculous feats of archery to introduce the possibility of armed resistance to tyranny. He even attributes the lack of records of a historical Robin Hood to deliberate suppression by the religious and political authorities that control the writing of history, transforming Robin Hood's survival in popular culture into an act of resistance.

The most extensive recent attention to Ritson's *Robin Hood* is found in the work of Stephen Knight. For Knight, tracing the changes to the Robin Hood legend over time, the most important aspect of Ritson's collection is its contribution to the nineteenth-century 'gentrification' of Robin Hood – the insistence on Robin as an aristocrat loyal to the rightful king. This reading is found throughout Knight's works, but is expanded upon most thoroughly in *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (2003). Ritson brought together in a single work the bold yeoman of the ballads and the Earl of Huntington from the Elizabethan plays of Anthony Munday, and Knight argues that 'the combination was the springboard for the dynamic performance of Robin Hood in the nineteenth century' (96). Knight notes that Percy had rejected a noble background for Robin Hood out of hand, leading to the observation that 'It is curious that Percy, the conservative would-be courtier, sees the lower-class medieval yeoman clearly enough, and feels the direct power of "Guy of Gisborne," while Ritson, so radical in so many ways, is in biographical terms an insistent conservative gentrifier' (97). Knight offers two explanations. The first, taken from Bronson, argues that Ritson included all the information he could while remaining sceptical, noting Ritson's introductory disclaimers on the limitations of the available evidence. Knight dismisses this as 'a routine disclaimer' (98). The second is a qualification of Ritson's radicalism:

The second way of explaining the anthology's apparent inconsistency on Earl Robin is to recognize the nature of Ritson's radicalism. As he makes clear in his famous description of Robin Hood, his real hatred is for the medieval church and oppressive kings, not for the lords....It is tyranny and its lackeys Ritson hates, not lordship itself; like many other dedicated radicals, past and present, he sees no contradiction in the cause of the people being led by someone from another class. Indeed, he seems (also like many modern radicals) to be gratified by this noble, in both senses, support. That inherently complex, if not contradictory position, espousing radicalism but still admiring a lord, is what permits Ritson to bring together in book form the previously separate strands of the Robin Hood tradition and to combine the previously opposed elements of his biography, bold yeoman and passively genteel earl. The succeeding tradition as a whole has drawn enormously on this new and crucial combination: in film and story the lord can be a trickster, and the bold outlaw can have the justification of noble blood. (98).

As Knight argues, noble leaders for a popular revolt were hardly unknown. However, I would argue that this apparent contradiction is less problematic if Ritson's *Robin Hood* is approached within the context of Ritson's other works and his immediate situation. Ritson's *Robin Hood* was, as Knight and others note, the beginning of a nineteenth and twentieth-century tradition. However, it was also the product of both long term eighteenth-century trends and very immediate pressures. Ritson's reasons for producing the work that he did at the time that he did were not necessarily the reasons that some features of that work resonated in later periods.

Ritson's insistence on a noble lineage for the historical Robin Hood was in keeping with the general practice of literary antiquarian controversy. That Percy rejected a noble birth for the hero and Ritson insisted upon it are hardly independent variables. Indeed, the long discussion of Munday's plays in the 'Notes and Illustrations' is interspersed with asides challenging Percy, such as the helpful remark that 'The next quotation may be of service to Dr. Percy, who has been pleased to question our heros nobility', and concludes with a triumphant 'Q.E.D.'

(lxiv, lxv). It would be entirely in character for Ritson to insist on a noble heritage simply because Percy had denied it. More significantly, it would be entirely in keeping with the way in which literary controversy was conducted more generally. The factional nature of controversy could produce apparently perverse alliances. The *Robin Hood* collection was hardly the only work produced at the time in which a scholar who was, demonstrably, an expert on his material deployed a great deal of useful research to prove a point that he, more than anyone, should have known to be absurd. As discussed in Chapter 1, Lolla establishes how the factional elements of the Rowley controversy can resolve similar, perverse contradictions. Attacking Warton's assertion of authority on grounds of taste, defending the importance of detailed and minute research as an alternative authority, and regional pride could become entangled with defending the existence of Rowley, so that some of the most competent scholars of the period could assemble impressively detailed and researched works to prove a point that their research obviously did not support. Ritson's work can be compared to Jacob Bryant's *Observations upon the Poems of Thomas Rowley* (1781), in which Bryant marshals an extensive knowledge of medieval English to prove that the existence of Rowley was not entirely implausible. As Miles argues, George Chalmers defended the Ireland forgeries not because he believed them to be authentic, but because Malone had declared they were not and the debate had acquired a political dimension.

As an antiquarian collection, *Robin Hood* is the product of several intersecting trends. For the body of the collection, Ritson builds upon the work of earlier seventeenth and eighteenth-century ballad collectors, and the continuing movement of material from private to publically accessible collections. The detailed textual notes that Ritson provides for each text in his collection reveal several trends. For example, for the first piece in the *Robin Hood* collection, the 'Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode', Ritson has identified four sixteenth-century print versions: one in the Cambridge University Library, then often referred to as the 'Public Library', one in the Garrick Collection in the British Museum, and two in the collection of Richard Farmer. In addition, a footnote to a discussion of the sources of the 'lytell geste' in the 'notes and illustrations' identifies another possible edition: in the Chepman and Millar prints acquired by the Advocate's Library in 1788 is a text that might be 'an

edition of the old poem in question; but all endeavours to procure a sight of or extract from it have proved unsuccessful, though the editor even took a journey to Edinburgh chiefly for the purpose, and received every possible degree of attention and civility from the worthy librarian: the book having been now detained out of the library for some years' (lxxv-lxxvi). This one item provides a convenient synecdoche for the sixteenth-century print sources available to Ritson. The British Museum is represented, although its early print collections in this period were of limited use, with the exception of the recently acquired Garrick Collection. He draws extensively on the collections of the University libraries, and while he remains informed of the items in the Advocate's Library, there are practical difficulties to consulting some collections. Privately owned materials still play a role, if, like Farmer, their owners are 'sensible, liberal, benevolent and worthy' men willing to make their collections available (*Letters* I: 57).

Of the other texts in the Robin Hood collection two other poems draw on texts held in the British Museum, while Cambridge provides a manuscript from Bishop More's collection and a black letter copy from the Pepysian library. The bulk of the texts in the collection are seventeenth-century ballads taken from the collections of Anthony Wood, then held in the Ashmolean Museum. Eighteen of the poems use texts from Wood's collection as their authority, in four cases supplemented by collation with one or more texts found elsewhere, and another uses a text from Wood to supply defects in another source.

Private collections are still represented. Two works draw on the ballads collected by Thomas Pearson, which had been purchased in 1788 by the Duke of Roxburghe. I have been unable to determine how and when Ritson gained access to these texts, although in a later letter from 1803 he refers to a visit to Roxburghe's library arranged by the bookseller and publisher George Nicol to collate editions of ballads found in Ramsay's *Tea-table Miscellany* (II: 239). Two other sources are simply identified as 'a private collection'. For one text unique to the Percy folio, Ritson can find no source other than Percy's *Reliques*, as he certainly did not have access to the manuscript. It is only for the eighteenth-century ballads that Ritson draws on works in his own possession, when he can find no earlier source than the contemporary ballad garlands for nine of his texts.

The 'Life' and 'Notes' draw on an extraordinary variety of fields of research. Ritson explains his motivation in the opening lines of his preface:

The singular circumstance, that the name of an outlawed individual of the twelfth or thirteenth century should continue traditionally popular...at the end of the eighteenth, excited the editors curiosity to retrieve all the historical or poetical remains concerning him that could be met with: an object which he has occasionally pursued for many years; and of which pursuit he now publishes the result. (i)

In this description of the collection's origin, Ritson invokes a specific model of antiquarian research: the editor's curiosity is excited, all the materials that can be collected are collected, often over many years, and then the results are published. This approach is evident throughout Ritson's many collections, often accompanied by explicit or implicit condemnation of those who offer unsupported assertions. However, as in the introductions to his other collections, Ritson struggles with the challenges posed by scanty evidence. This is far from a routine disclaimer, as Knight suggests, but is a central concern of Ritson's work and his challenges to others. He presents his findings with substantial qualifications and reservations:

He cannot, indeed, pretend that his researches, extensive as they must appear, have been attended with all the success he could have wished; ...

The materials collected for "the life" of this celebrated character, which are either preserved at large, or carefully referred to, in the "notes and illustrations," are not, it must be confessed, in every instance, so important, so ancient, or, perhaps, so authentic, as the subject seems to demand; although the compiler may be permitted to say, in humble second-hand imitation of the poet Martial:

Some there are good, some middling, and some bad;  
But yet they were the best that could be had. (i)

Ritson attempts to provide a model of responsible antiquarian research, promising that he has 'everywhere faithfully vouched and exhibited his authorities', honestly displaying them and their limitations. As unsatisfactory as they are, the materials

Ritson collected are impressive, the best that could be had, a testament not only to his own industry but to the sources available to him at the end of the eighteenth century.

For example, the claim that Robin Hood was born ‘at Locksley in the county of Nottingham’ leads to a note that references a sixteenth-century manuscript in the Sloane collection of the British Museum, Fuller’s *Worthies of England*, and five antiquarian works, none of which support his claim. Throughout the ‘notes and illustrations’, Ritson draws extensively on the detailed local antiquarian research that Sweet has demonstrated formed the core of antiquarian work in the eighteenth century. The structure of the ‘Life’ and the ‘Notes’ offers a degree of organization, so that all the disparate material related to Locksley, or Friar Tuck, or Maid Marian, or remarkable feats of archery could be gathered under separate headings.

Although the collection as a whole is primarily a work of ballad collecting and antiquarian research, the eighteenth-century development of Shakespearean editing had an indirect, but pervasive influence on Ritson’s work. As eighteenth-century Shakespearean editing developed, a knowledge of Shakespeare’s context, sources, and contemporaries became increasingly important. Theobald for example claimed to have read ‘above 800 old *English Plays*’ as well as the works identified as the sources of Shakespeare’s plots (Walsh 140). Each successive editor was quick to point out where his predecessors had mistaken an obsolete word or an obscure allusion for a corruption in need of correction. Ritson himself published scathing criticisms first of Johnson and Steevens edition and had plans to produce his own edition. In his unpublished ‘Catalogue of Romances’, most of the private collections consulted by Ritson, especially those of Farmer, Steevens, Reed, and Douce, belonged to men who were involved in various degrees with Shakespearean research, as did the Garrick and Capell collections. As Ritson notes, it was Malone, in his edition of Shakespeare, who had identified Munday as the author of the Robin Hood plays, and Ritson frequently draws on the work of Malone, Steevens, and occasionally Johnson in his ‘Notes and Illustrations’.

In the *Robin Hood* collection, two plays by Anthony Munday provide the primary source for the identification of Robin Hood as the earl of Huntington, and Ritson provides a detailed description of both plays, with lengthy quotations. Ritson had a longstanding interest in Munday, in his role as a translator of continental

romance rather than as a playwright. After the entry for one translation in his 'Catalogue', an extra leaf has been added with biographical information and a record of his epitaph, with the excuse 'this is probably the last time we shall have the pleasure with our old friend Anthony' (114). The prominence given to the Munday plays in the *Robin Hood* collection is perhaps not merely the result of desire to prove that Robin Hood was the Earl of Huntington (and prove Percy wrong in dismissing the claim), but partially influenced by the desire to link the collection to the more prestigious field of research into Elizabethan drama and Ritson's pre-existing interest in Munday. The *British Critic* even suggested that Ritson would have been better served by editing the Munday plays, rather than the 'very reprehensible effusions' of the ballads (21).

In his collection, the 'Life', and the 'Notes and Illustrations', Ritson is primarily concerned with collecting all extant material, evaluating and organizing it into some sort of narrative, however inadequate, while transparently and accurately documenting his sources. (And, as always, attacking Thomas Percy). However, Ritson's collection was also the product of an atheist and political radical in an intensely politically charged period, and in many ways he promotes a radical reading of the 'celebrated English outlaw', one not lost on his contemporaries. While the insistence on Robin Hood as a historical figure was a major feature of the work, it was always accompanied by, and often in tension with, an interest in the continuous popularity of the hero in both literary and popular culture. Ritson promises an exhaustive collection – 'all the ancient poems, songs, and ballads' – with the necessary qualification that only those 'now extant' are available. He presents 'the celebrated English outlaw' as a well-known character, and both Robin Hood's popularity and his position as an outlaw are central to Ritson's understanding of the character. The title-page contrasts the two opposing frameworks which structure Ritson's collection, and indeed Robin Hood scholarship in the centuries since. The collection itself is a literary production, a collection of 'poems, songs, and ballads' while the 'historical anecdotes' assume the existence of an historical Robin Hood whose life can be reconstructed. The epigraph, taken from Drayton's *Poly-olbion*, emphasises the key themes of Ritson's collection:

In this our spacious isle I think there is not one,



But he 'of Robin Hood hath heard' and Little John;  
 And to the end of time the tales shall ne'er be done  
 Of Scarlock, George a Green and Much the miller's son,  
 Of Tuck, the merry friar, which many a sermon made  
 In praise of Robin Hood, his out-laws, and their trade.

Drayton, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, remarks on the pervasive knowledge of Robin Hood. By repurposing this statement as the epigraph for his collection, Ritson suggests that it is as true in 1795 as it was in 1622, constructing a continuous tradition within which his collection is located.

Ritson's Robin Hood is the avowed enemy of corrupt and hypocritical clergy, despite his personal piety:

Our hero, indeed, seems to have held bishops, abbots, priests, and monks, in a word, all the clergy, regular or secular, in decided aversion....and, in this part of his conduct, perhaps, the pride, avarice, uncharitableness, and hypocrisy of these clerical drones, or pious locusts, (too many of whom are still permitted to prey upon the labours of the industrious, and are supported in pampered luxury, at the expense of those whom their useless and pernicious craft tends to retain in superstitious ignorance and irrational servility) will afford him ample justification. (ix-x)

Ritson can rarely be accused of subtlety. The parenthetical remark, excised in all the posthumous editions, makes the relevance to the present explicit. The links to the present were obvious to Ritson's contemporaries. The reviewer for the *British Critic* uses one of Ritson's 'indecent and unnecessary' attacks on 'Christian belief' as an opportunity to reflect on the evils of atheism, and quoting the passage mentioned, the reviewer declares:

Who does not see, in this courteous passage, the mild and gentle temper of modern philosophy, which has so benevolently reformed ecclesiastical faults in France, by proscription and massacre? But, in this country, not yet given up, and, we trust in Providence, not to be given up to such desolating *philanthropy*, it is surely a just matter of most strong complaint, that a careless, or literary, reader cannot look

for a Ballad of Robin Hood, or an account of his life, without meeting with what must either shock his feelings, or corrupt his principles.

(17)

In 1795, attacks on a corrupt clergy have clear links to contemporary atheism and events in France.

Robin Hood (and Ritson) is not merely the enemy of the clergy. A long digression on apparently miraculous feats of archery shifts into a rumination on the loss of that skill with the introduction of artillery:

The loss sustained from this change by the people at large seems irreparable. Anciently, the use of the bow or bill qualified every man for a soldier; and a body of peasants, led by a Tyler or a Cade, was not less formidable than any military force that could be raised to oppose them: by which means the people from time to time preserved the very little liberty they had, and which their tyrants were constantly endeavouring to wrest from them. (xxxvii)

Medieval rebels could have an immediate relevance – the year before the *Robin Hood* collection was published Southey had written but not published his own work on Wat Tyler. The invocations of Tyler and Cade were not lost on the *British Critic*, and the reviewer notes that ‘it is not against the clergy alone, that the indignation of this writer is directed, it seems equally levelled at all the most respectable members of the community; all such venerable magistrates and nobles as Tyler and Cade, with their bloody rabble, endeavoured to destroy’ (17). Ritson’s ‘tyrants’ become ‘the most respectable members of the community’, ‘venerable magistrates and nobles; ‘a body of peasants’ or ‘the people’ become ‘bloody rabble’. In any case, Ritson makes the relevance to the present explicit:

See how the case stands at present: the sovereign, let him be who or what he will, (kings have been tyrants and may be so again,) has a standing army, well disciplined and accoutred, while the subjects or people are absolutely defenceless: as much care having been taken, particularly since “the glorious revolution,” to deprive them of arms as was formerly bestowed to enforce their use and practice. (xxxvii)

Ritson invokes medieval peasants' revolts before explicitly raising the possibility of armed resistance to tyranny in the present, and contemporary debates about standing armies. The *British Critic* responds to this passage with the reflection that:

They who saw the proceedings of the London mobs in 1780, will not regret that they had not the same command of arms, and skill in their use, as the troops called in to quell their fury.... This author, then, whose enmity to the *glorious* revolution seems only to be equalled by his desire of another of a very contrary description, has chosen an unfortunate topic' (19).

In the 1820 edition, this passage is excised entirely, in the 1832 edition it is given a degree of respectability by an added reference to Hume's essay on the protestant succession.

For Ritson, Robin Hood is an outlaw: the 'celebrated English outlaw' of the title, the 'outlawed individual' of the preface. He presents Robin Hood as 'an independent sovereign' within his small domain 'at perpetual war, indeed, with the king of England, and all his subjects, with the exception, however, of the poor and needy', the enemy of 'what was called law and government' (v). However, he is emphatically not 'guilty of manifest treason or rebellion; as he most certainly can be justly charged with neither' (vi). It is here that Robin Hood's status as an outlaw becomes crucial: 'An outlaw, in those times, being deprived of protection, owed no allegiance' (vi). Like Ishmael, "His hand 'was' against every man, and every mans hand against him", like the apothecary of *Romeo and Juliet* 'The world was not his friend, nor the worlds law' (vi). Robin Hood owes no loyalty, he is not reneging on any obligations. He is outside the law. He is unquestionably a robber, but he is 'the most humane and the prince of all robbers' (ix). Ritson includes the parallels drawn by others between Robin Hood and William Wallace, 'the champion and deliverer of his country', another charismatic leader who resists authority to which he owes no obligations (ix). In Ritson's hands, Robin Hood does not merely resist unjust authority, he provides an opportunity to challenge any claim to authority. The forests 'were his territories; those who accompanied and adhered to him his subjects': 'and what better title king Richard could pretend to the territory of England than Robin Hood had to the dominion of Barnsdale or Sherwood is a question humbly submitted

to the consideration of the political philosopher' (vi). To the political philosophers of the day, the question of when one ceases to owe loyalty or obedience to a monarch, or on what grounds a monarch could claim dominion, had an immediate salience.

In his 'Notes and Illustrations', Ritson quotes Thomas Fuller's response to the description of Robin Hood as a redistributive robber in *The Worthies of England* (1662) – 'But who...made him a judge? or gave him commission to take where it might be best spared, and give where it was most wanted?'—and responds with an attack on tyranny:

That same power, one may answer, which authorises kings to take where it can be *worst* spared, and give it where it is *least* wanted. Our hero, in this respect, was a knight-errant; and wanted no other commission than that of Justice, whose cause he militated. His power, compared with that of the king of England, was, by no means, either equally usurped, or equally abused: the one reigned over subjects (or slaves) as a master (or tyrant), the other possessed no authority but what was delegated to him by the free suffrage of his adherents, for their general good: and, as for the rest, it would be absurd to blame in Robin what we should praise in Richard. The latter, too, warred in remote parts of the world against nations from which neither he nor his subjects had sustained any injury; the former at home against those whose wealth, avarice, or ambition, he might fairly attribute not only his own misfortunes, but the misery of the oppressed and enslaved society he had quitted. (xv-xvi)

For Ritson, this is not merely a question of what loyalty Robin Hood owed to Richard in the twelfth century. It is a question of justice, of oppression, and of the possibility of revolution, and so leads to a call to action:

In a word, every man who has the power has also the authority to pursue the ends of justice; to regulate the gifts of fortune, by transferring the superfluities of the rich to the necessities of the poor; by relieving the oppressed, and even, when necessary, destroying the oppressor. These are the objects of the social union; and every

individual may, and to the utmost of his power should, endeavour to promote them. (xl)

As an enemy of the clergy and all tyrants, Robin's absence from historical records is likely a deliberate suppression, a result of 'his avowed enmity to churchmen; and history, in former times, was written by none but monks' (xv). Ritson concludes his biography with Robin's death:

Such was the end of Robin Hood: a man who, in a barbarous age, and under a complicated tyranny, displayed a spirit of freedom and independence, which has endeared him to the common people, whose cause he maintained, (for all opposition to tyranny is the cause of the people,) and in spite of the malicious endeavours of pitiful monks, by whom history was consecrated to the crimes and follies of titled ruffians and sainted idiots, to suppress all record of his patriotic exertions and virtuous acts, will render his name immortal. (xii)

Ritson's difficulty in uncovering the historical Robin Hood becomes the result of deliberate suppression; Robin Hood's continuous popularity becomes resistance. Robin Hood is excluded from historical records but, as the champion of the people, continues to exist in popular culture. Ritson presents Robin Hood as a *de facto* saint: he can be sworn by, his songs function as psalms, 'he may be regarded as the patron of archery', he is associated with miracles, there are festivals in his memory, objects and places associated with him are treated as relics and objects of pilgrimage (xii). Ritson's own contribution to Robin Hood's immortality proved to be his most popular work, in various expurgated forms, which would not perhaps have surprised him.

Although Ritson had been planning a collection of Robin Hood ballads for some time, the collection appeared during an intensely politically charged period. Suppression was not merely historical. When he discusses corrupt clergy, a note connects the medieval Robin Hood to the treason trials of the year before, noting that 'a well-drawn character of a lordly prelate of our own days may be found in *The adventures of Hugh Trevor*, a novel by Thomas Holcroft (one of the persons who had

the honour to be indicted for high-treason in 1794)' (xlii).<sup>22</sup> Ritson was, at the time, a minor figure in Godwin's circle, to which he had likely been introduced by Holcroft. The *Robin Hood* collection was published by Thomas Egerton and Joseph Johnson, both of whom had, together and separately, published previous works by Ritson. Johnson was deeply involved in radical circles, and was himself tried and imprisoned in 1798. After Ritson's death in 1803, Godwin wrote a brief memoir for the *Monthly Magazine*, in which he notes that Ritson, who 'till his death remained firmly attached to the principles of republicanism' was in his professional role as Bailiff of the liberties of the Savoy, immediately overseen by John Reeves, the 'notorious leader of the association for encouraging spies and informers' (376). Ritson's attacks on tyranny were not without very real risk.

Ritson's letters demonstrate that the possibility of arrest, and a conviction that revolution was eminent, was never far from his mind in these years. In a letter to Wadeson from January 1793, largely concerned with his sister's funeral arrangements, he adds a postscript 'You may give Citizen Equality a hint that I find it prudent to say as little as possible upon political subjects, in order to keep myself out of Newgate' (II: 7). In March of 1794 he wrote to William Laing in Edinburgh, explaining that 'I dare not call you Citizen, lest, when I revisit your metropolis, your scoundrel judges should send me for fourteen years to Botany Bay; only I am in good hopes, before that event takes place, they will all be sent to the devil' (II: 47). Ritson also sporadically adopted the revolutionary calendar, though he occasionally admitted that he did not entirely understand it.

Ritson's letters to Joseph Frank provide an intriguing glimpse into his attitudes and concerns, as Ritson continued to provide his nephew with a constant stream of advice. When Frank was younger, his uncle had advised him to look after his teeth, to learn an instrument, to collect nursery rhymes and to continue his

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<sup>22</sup> Privately, Ritson was bemused by the popularity of novels, writing to Walker that 'Novel-Writing is certainly in high estimation. Mrs. Radcliffe, author of "The Romance of the Forest," has one at present in the hands of Robinsons for which she asks five hundred pounds, though it is but to consist of four volumes. Godwin also, and I believe, Holcroft, have each one in the press. In short, one would suppose all the world to be novel readers, though, for my part, I must with shame confess I never look into one' (II: 49-50).

studies. However, by the 1790s, Frank was a young man, who had followed his uncle into a conveyancing career, moved to London, and adopted many of his radical sentiments (he also had his own incompatible thoughts on spelling reform). Ritson's still copious advice turned to the professional, the political, and the intersections between them.

Ritson advises his nephew, whom he generally addresses during this period as 'citizen nephew' or 'citizen, my nephew', to devote himself to his professional development, while expressing a degree of ambivalence towards his own position. Encouraging his nephew to take a position offered by an acquaintance ('citizen Wolley') which would allow him to set up his own practice as a conveyancer after five years, he notes that 'if it had not been for that little dirty place in the Savoy, I should most probably at this moment have been either in a jail, an attorneys office, or stationers shop; and it would be hard to say which of those situations is the worst' (II: 22). As of August of 1793, revolution might be imminent but is still in many ways unimaginable:

With respect to a revolution, though I think it at no great distance, it seems to defy all calculations for the present. If the increase of taxes, the decline of manufactures, the high price of provisions, and the like, have no effect upon the apathy of the sans culottes here, one can expect little from the reasoning of philosophers or politicians. When the pot boils violently, however, it is not always in the cooks power to prevent the fat from falling into the fire. But suppose a revolution do happen, how is it to provide for you? People will have to work for their bread, I presume, pretty much as they do at present; for a long series of years at least; and he who has nothing will be in equal danger of starving. In fact the idea of an approaching change should influence you the rather to fix yourself in a business or situation which would enable you to take advantage of it when it did come: and I do not see but an attorney is as likely to make his way in case of a revolution as any other member of the profession. (II: 23-24).

In a letter to his conservative friend Wadeson in February of 1794, he expands upon his thoughts on the coming revolution, assuring him that no serious disruption to

private property is likely, and advising him to read the ‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Enquiry concerning Political Justice’, while acknowledging that places like his own would certainly be abolished (II: 43).

Ritson provided his nephew with constant updates on events in London. In November of 1793, he reports that

Citizen Godwin had been here twice....I have likewise had repeated visits from citizen Holcroft....The attorney general has prepared no less than three indictments against Eaton for his “Hogs wash,” and a fourth against poor Spence for his “Pigs meat:” so that these two worthy swineherds seem to have brought their hogs to a fine market. I have not yet seen the latter, but Eatons daughter informs me that he has long made up his mind for another imprisonment, and has accordingly taken a shop in Newgate-street, that he may have his family near him, and that the great cause, which he appears to have much at heart, may not be neglected in his confinement. We have not been hitherto able to do anything for our friend Rickman, who sent me the other day one of citizen Paines pens, with some pretty occasional verses, which you may probably like to see. Les voila.

Impromptu.

To Citizen J. Ritson.

With heartfelt joy to you I send,

This precious relic of my friend.

With *this*, our *Paine* those pages wrote,

Which all the good with rapture quote;

And which, ere long, from Pole to Pole,

Shall *purge* and *renovate* the whole;

Shall monarch, man’s *greatest* curse,

And all its satellites disperse,

And make the human race exclaim,

We owe our happiness to Paine! (II: 34-35)

In January of 1794, he promises Frank ‘a beautiful edition and copy of Rousseaus *Inégalité des hommes*’, noting that he has hung portraits of Rousseau, Voltaire and



Paine in his room (II: 39). In the same letter, he advises his nephew to ‘lay your politics and philosophy upon the shelf, for a few years at least’, while devoting himself to business. ‘I know by fatal experience how necessary this sort of advice was to myself at your age’, he admits, ‘but the misfortune is that I had neither friend nor relation to give it to me’ (II: 41).

Upon the occasion of the arrests, Ritson wrote to his nephew:

As I have heard nothing either of your execution or imprisonment (neither of which, by the way, would have much surprised me) I take it for granted you enjoy life and liberty, very precarious enjoyments, let me tell you, in these ticklish times. For my own part, the storm seems to have blown over me, and I suppose myself out of danger; but whether I am to thank prudence or fortune, I cannot exactly determine. The judges commissioned for trial of the patriots in the Tower are expected to sit on the 2d of October, and to adjourn (if bills be found) to the 16<sup>th</sup>, when the trials will commence. Great expectations are formed of the eloquence and magnanimity of Horne Tooke, and we have no doubt but he will acquit himself in every sense, to the confusion of his persecutors. Not a place, it is said, will be procurable under a guinea, but I mean, at present, to slip on my wig and gown, – being my first appearance of that stage. Did you ask (for I don’t exactly know what I have done with your letter) whether Godwins book was about to appear in 8vo? I can only tell you that he is preparing for such an edition, but I do not think it likely to be published these twelve months. I suppose he will give me timely notice, as I myself have the 4to edition – though it cost me, by the by, no more than 18s. – You have read his novel, I presume; he has got it sufficiently puffed in the Critical Review, but, between ourselves, it is a very indifferent, or rather despicable performance, – at all events unworthy of the author of *Political justice* I have no patience with it. (57-58)

Ritson continued to send his nephew reports as the trials progressed, although he became increasingly disenchanted with the behaviour of Holcroft and others.

When initially published, the collection was a minor antiquarian work, and met with ambivalent responses from the small audience interested in such material. However, tastes were changing. In her work on the use of Robin Hood and King Arthur in the formation of English national identity, Stephanie Barczewski identifies 1818 as the ‘*annus mirabilis* of Robin Hood... for 1818 gave birth to three important interpretations of the legend which heralded the beginning of an era’: Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1820), Peacock’s *Maid Marian* (1822) and Keats’ ‘Robin Hood: To a Friend’ (44). In 1820, Ritson’s collection was reprinted in a single duodecimo volume by an unnamed editor who anticipated that ‘this little volume will prove peculiarly acceptable at the present moment, in consequence of the hero, and his merry companions, having been recently portrayed in the most lively colours by the masterly hand of the author of *Ivanhoe*.’ As this editor hoped ‘to produce a book which could with propriety be put into the hands of a young person’, some changes had to be made. Many of Ritson’s most vehement attacks on the clergy and the explicit links to contemporary politics are excised, as is a great deal of the textual scholarship, seriously altering the nature of the collection. This version was reprinted again in 1823, textually identical but with a slightly different selection and arrangement of vignettes.

Joseph Frank prepared another edition, described as the second, in 1832, as a part of his larger plan to publish his uncle’s letters and unpublished works, and to reprint his most important collections. Some copies of this text include a list of works by Ritson recently published. Frank promises an even more exhaustive and complete collection:

The former edition of Robin Hood was published by Mr. Ritson in 1795, who continued from time to time to make additions to his own copy, from which the present edition has been carefully printed.

The original engravings, by the celebrated Bewick, have been again used; and from the improved art of wood-cut-printing, will be found superior in clearness and beauty to the first impression.

The tale of “Robin Hood and the Monk, of which the existence was unknown to Mr. Ritson, though he has anxiously preserved a small fragment of it... is now added to the “Appendix”

The newly added “Robin Hood and the Monk” was collated by Frederic Madden, one of a new generation of scholars, and one with a persistent interest in Ritson. Bewick’s records show that Frank went as far as commissioning a new cut of an engraving that had been damaged (Tattersfield 589). In this edition, Ritson’s attacks on the clergy are considerably softened, although not altogether erased. However the textual notes remain intact. The collection was reprinted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, usually in versions derived from these expurgated editions. For example, a facsimile of the 1823 edition was published in 1972, while a facsimile of the 1887 edition (taken from the 1832 edition, with additional illustrations) was published in 1997.

In 1847, John Matthew Gutch sought to challenge Ritson’s collection, with *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode, With Other Ancient & Modern Ballads and Songs Relating to This Celebrated Yeoman, To Which is Prefixed His History and Character, Grounded Upon Other Documents Than Those Made Use of By His Former Biographer, “Mister Ritson”*. Gutch’s entire work is structured as a response to Ritson, demonstrating how deeply entwined Ritson had become with Robin Hood in the nineteenth century (the somewhat excessive subtitle was removed from the edition of 1850). Gutch accepts Ritson’s initial assumptions – that there was a historical Robin Hood, whose identity can be discovered if enough information can be gathered, and who can then function as a national hero – but offers his own work as a correction:

In the present endeavour to place the life and character of Robin Hood in a new and more favourable light, than that in which his early and scanty history is recorded by anonymous ballad writers and penny chap-book publishers, and more especially in an attempt to controvert the noble lineage which Mr. Ritson in his modern and more elaborate Life has ascribed to him, the Editor is aware that he has many popular prejudices and prepossessions to contend against in the credulity of the former class, and a minutely accurate and singularly pains-taking opponent in the latter gentleman. (i)

Ritson forms an integral part of Gutch’s collection. The second volume opens with his portrait (adapted from the caricature) and signature as a frontispiece, and a

‘Memoir of Mr. Ritson’ with the reflection that ‘In the present reprint of “The Lytell Geste of Robin Hood,” and the ballads relating to him and his companions, it would be unpardonable to omit any biographical notice of Mr. Ritson, who first collected so many of them, and to whose research and criticism the ballad literature of the country has been so much indebted’ (i). Gutch situates his collection within a growing body of work on Ritson, building his memoir upon the earlier works of Haslewood and Nicolas and the recently published *Letters*.

Ritson’s place as the editor of Robin Hood was further cemented with the publication of ‘Ritson’s Robin Hood’ as Part I of Volume II of Cooke’s ‘Universal Library’ in 1853. This was sold for one shilling, and introduced by a ‘memoir’ which is worth quoting at length, as it distils the judgement of Ritson that had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century:

Joseph Ritson, the author and compiler of “Robin Hood,” was born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, at Stockton-upon-Tees, in the county of Durham. He was bred to the law, and practiced as a Conveyancer in Gray’s-Inn. In 1785 he purchased the office of High Bailiff of the Liberties of the Savoy, which he retained to his death. His tastes led him to the study of antiquarian lore, which he prosecuted with uncommon industry and acuteness. In recovering dates, assigning anonymous fragments to their authors, and in all points where a minute accuracy can alone lead to success, he has perhaps few superiors; but the unfortunate acerbity of his temper, which was strongly marked on features that, as it has been expressed, never appeared *human* except when he was poring over Gothic books, led him to criticise the labours of his most celebrated contemporaries, especially Warton, Percy, and Malone, with a virulence that had in it something of malignity. His style of writing was, like his temper, harsh and rugged, and is remarkable for an affected orthography, which, though perhaps in some points defensible, seems to rather the result of caprice than judgment. In the present edition these peculiarities have, after due deliberation, been scrupulously retained, so that we believe that could Joseph Ritson himself arise from the dead, he would admit that we

have done him justice. His peculiarities were not all adopted without at least a show of reason, and as his opinion may in some cases be regarded as of value, we determined to reprint the volume exactly as we found it. The only variations are the omission of two passages, which were marked by such extreme virulence and extravagance, one of them running into obscenity, that, as they had no relation to the subject in hand, but were mere ebullitions of person and political feeling, we felt it right to expunge them: the other alteration is the substitution of glossarial foot-notes, with some additions, for the glossary appended to the original publication.

Besides “Robin Hood,” which is one of his most valuable pieces, he published several other works, critical and antiquarian, which it is unnecessary here to enumerate. His last work was a “Treatise on Abstinence from Animal Food,” in which so many impious and extravagant sentiments were expressed that he could not for some time find a publisher. It appeared but a short time before his death, and can be regarded only as the offspring of a diseased mind.

Bronson records several issues of this edition, noting that a precise bibliography is difficult to compile, as copies are often undated and unbound (774). The ‘Prospectus’ for Cooke’s ‘Universal Library’ is appended to this edition, and identifies itself as one of a ‘number of cheap popular Libraries now in the course of publication’, with the stated aim of providing handsomely printed but inexpensive works, with the assurance that ‘No work will be included in this library which has not already so completely gained universal approbation as to have become an indispensable part of the world’s literature; such works as ought to be found in every public library, and which the present undertaking will place within the reach of the inmates of every house where the English language is spoken’. The inclusion of Ritson’s *Robin Hood* in this undertaking, unthinkable at the time it was first published, is a striking demonstration of how the borders of English literature had shifted, in part due to the earlier work of Ritson.

The popularity of Robin Hood, as evidenced by these editions, as well as too many others to list, has led to a productive field of study, one in which Ritson is ever

present, particularly as attention gradually turned towards the study of the reception of Robin Hood. In his influential work *Robin Hood* (1982), J.C. Holt offers an ambivalent response to Ritson's collection. Concerned with disentangling the study of the evolving legend from the pointless quest to identify the historical Robin Hood, Holt is scathing in his dismissal of Ritson's 'Life', noting that 'like others before or since, Ritson was loath to jettison unsubstantiated detail' and so while Ritson assembled everything that could be found, 'the tradition he summed up was aboriginally ramshackle. The plethora of detail had overwhelmed the critical apparatus available for its sifting' (44, 45). While Holt is unimpressed by Ritson's practice as a scholar, he emphasizes Ritson's role as one of the key contributors to the modern understanding of Robin Hood. While some earlier sources mentioned that Robin refrained from robbing the poor, the hero who robbed from the rich to give to the poor was a 'very minor part' in the 'composite picture of Robin Hood....The weight which it came to acquire came largely from one man, Joseph Ritson' (184). Jeffrey L. Singman offers a more generous appraisal in *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend* (1998), arguing that 'The history of Robin Hood scholarship begins in 1795 with the publication of Joseph Ritson's impressive if eccentric' collection. He observes that 'subsequent scholarship has found little to add to his corpus of early Robin Hood balladry', and that 'fanciful' as his biography was, 'Ritson amasses an enormous and perennially valuable body of early references to the legend' (2). It was the best that could be had.

## Chapter 5: Scottish Songs

The preface to *A Select Collection of English Songs* had promised a companion collection of Scottish songs. This was finally published in 1794, as *Scottish Songs*.<sup>23</sup> In his preface to the later work Ritson assures readers that ‘It may be of some consequence to learn, that this is by no means one of those crude and hasty publications of which there are too frequent instances; it has received the occasional attention of many years, and no opportunity has been neglected of rendering it more worthy of approbation; the editor having even made repeated visits to different parts of Scotland for the purpose of obtaining materials or information upon the subject’ (ii). With this collection, Ritson found himself in the unusual position of publishing a work on Scottish song in London as an Englishman, drawing heavily on the work of Scottish writers and collectors. His only claim to authority rests on the assurance of thorough research and scrupulous accuracy:

It may be naturally supposed that a publication of this nature would have been rendered more perfect by a native of North Britain. Without discussing this question, the editor has only to observe that diligent enquiry, extensive reading, and unwearying assiduity, added to the strictest integrity, and most disinterested views, have possibly tended to lessen the disadvantages of an English birth; and he is persuaded the present collection, such as it is, will not suffer by comparison with any thing of the kind hitherto published in either country. (viii)

Although it was certainly read in Scotland (Ritson sent several copies as gifts to the men in Edinburgh who had assisted him) the implied reader is usually English, with terms such as ‘our ancestors’ occasionally being employed.

Facing the first page of the collection is a reminder to readers of two other ‘Books Published by J. Johnson, in St. Pauls Church-Yard’:

*A Select Collection of English Songs*, in three volumes, crown 8vo.  
with vignette engravings by Heath, and others, from the designs of

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<sup>23</sup> ‘The word *Scottish*’ Ritson explains in a footnote, ‘is an improper orthography of *Scottish*; *Scotch* is still more corrupt, and *Scots* (as an adjective) is a national barbarism’ (i).

Stothard; and a historical essay on national song. Price. 12s. sewed.  
1793. [sic]

*Ancient Songs*, from the time of king Henry III. to the Revolution,  
crown 8vo. with notes, and a glossary; and vignette etchings, by  
Stothard. Price 6s. sewed. 1790.

Prefixed are, I. Observations on the ancient English Minstrels, II.  
Dissertation on the songs, music, and vocal and instrumental  
performance of the ancient English

Ten years earlier, Ritson had faced the question of how to organize and present his research. One strategy which he pursued was to identify texts by genre, in this case songs, and then draw further subdivisions, forming a tripartite division between English, Ancient, and Scottish works, editing the different works in different, yet complimentary ways. *Scotish Songs* was likewise published in crown octavo (the three works in six volumes would sit handsomely together on a shelf) and sold for 10s. 6d., (*British Critic* May 1796). The engravings were designed by David Allan and engraved by Stothard, Ritson writing to William Laing in the summer of 1793 to assure him that:

My “Scotish Songs” have been very much neglected; but I hope to get them ready for publication by Christmas. I shall press Stothard hard this week to decide the fate of Mr. Allan’s designs, and either you or he shall soon know what use we make of them. But it is fact, that many engravers will not undertake a drawing which they have to reduce. (II: 21)

Allan’s pastoral designs created a visual link with other publications of Scottish poetry at the time. *Scotish Songs* shares much of its structure with the earlier English collection, with some significant differences. It too is equipped with a preface describing its structure, an introductory ‘Historical Essay on Scotish Song’, and is divided into four classes: ‘Love Songs’, ‘Comic Songs’, ‘Historical, Political and Martial Songs’ and ‘Romantic and Legendary Songs, or what are usually and properly denominated Ballads’ (ii). Although the internal organization of the classes is less elaborate than that of the earlier collection, it is carefully and deliberately organized.



Ritson's engagement with Scottish material was shaped by the same pressures that influenced his English works, sometimes in an exaggerated manner. He both engaged in vituperative controversy, in his rivalry with John Pinkerton, and relied upon a collaborative network. His publications were made possible, or sometimes were not, by the availability of material in public collections. The material that he was able to collect had to be defined and organized before it could be published. The first two sections of this chapter will address the historical essay, which Ritson divides into two sections, addressing first the language and then the music of his songs. The third will consider the texts of the collection, their sources, and the results achieved by gathering them together. The fourth will address the collaboration and controversy which underpinned Ritson's Scottish research, and the complex history of the *Caledonian Muse*.

**'the subject of this essay is that of the natives of Scotland speaking and writing the English language'**

The 'Historical Essay on Scottish Song' which introduces the Scottish collection has a decidedly narrower scope than the 'Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song', in part because Ritson now had the option of simply directing his readers to his earlier work. Footnotes direct readers to the *English Songs*, *Ancient Songs* and even to *Gammer Gurton's Garland*. However, as in the earlier work, the borders of the collection must be defined. While 'English' had been defined in contrast to 'Scottish', 'Irish' or 'our Gallic neighbours', 'Scottish', for the purposes of this collection, is given a historical introduction. The first portion of the essay is concerned with tracing the early linguistic history of 'the north parts of Britain, now called Scotland' (xi). The earliest inhabitants are identified as:

the Caledonians; a people of the same race with the Britons...children, in a word, of that immense family of Celts....Their language, varied by dialect, and corrupted by the influx of foreign words, is still spoken in Wales, in Ireland in the highlands or mountainous parts of Scotland, in the Hebrides or Western isles, in the isle of Man, in Armorica or Basse-Bretagne, an among the Waldenses, a little nation in the Alps; and was, two or three centuries ago, the

vulgar speech of Cornwall and Galloway, where, if yet extinct, it continued to be known within the memory of persons now living. (xi-xii)

At the time of the Roman invasion, portions of the country were settled by the Picts, who ‘spoke a dialect at least of the language of the original inhabitants; with whom it is highly probable they were, in the course of time, indistinguishably blended’ (xii). The ‘Scots, or Irish’ formed a ‘third Celtic colony’ arriving in the third century. As in many of Ritson’s works, and literary antiquarian works more generally, a balance between a clear narrative and a transparent presentation of accumulated evidence was difficult to achieve. The early linguistic history of Scotland is presented in a simple narrative. However, it is supported, and nearly crowded off the page, by extensive footnotes, themselves equipped in places with their own set of footnotes, providing supporting evidence and attacking John Pinkerton. Ritson’s concern is with language, Pinkerton’s with race, and Ritson abuses Pinkerton for his own predilection for abuse:

Mr. Pinkerton... has been pleased not only to contend that the Picts were Goths, but to be very lavish in his abuse upon those who have dared to think otherwise. A complete refutation of this hypothesis would require a large volume, and must be expected from some able hand: but no one, in the mean time, can refrain from lamenting that a discussion so curious and important, and in the course of which the enquirer has evinced uncommon industry and singular acuteness, should be degraded by groundless assertion, absurd prejudice, scurrilous language, and diabolical malignity.\* Mr. Pinkerton’s only argument, setting aside his fulminations of *fool*, *blockhead*, &c. which do not, with submission, appear intitled to that appellation, is, that, because the Picts came from Scandinavia, they were consequently Scythians; which by no means follows, since the “Celtic savages” (as he is pleased to call them) had peopled all that country long before his favourite Goths arrived in it.

\* See his treatment of the Celts, wild Irish, and highlanders, *passim*. To suppose a particular people, who, in genius and virtue, are inferior

to none upon the earth, intended by nature “as a medial race between beasts and men,” and seriously propose methods “to get rid of the breed,” argues a being of a “medial race,” between devil and man. The author has been thought to be possessed with an incubus; he would seem also to have been engendered by one. (xv)

Ritson traces the changes in language, disregarding any other forms of population change. The ‘name and language’ of the Picts disappears from history, but the people do not, and the ‘the Pictish language seems to have yielded to the courtly ascendancy of the Gaelic’ (xvi). The intrusion of English into the lowlands is similarly understood as a gradual linguistic change motivated by many overlapping influences beginning in the eleventh century, becoming first the language of the court and over the course of several centuries, ‘the common speech of the people...the innovations then made were productive of such consequences that in the time of Alexander III. *anno* 1249, the language of the two countries differed, if at all, only in dialect’ (xx). A history of the poetry and song of any of the Celtic languages spoken in Scotland before this time ‘would no doubt be curious and interesting; but, unfortunately, no remains or vestiges thereof are now to be met with’ (xxii). At this point, Ritson must address the poems of Ossian, which ‘every one at least is, or ought to be, now satisfied’ that they are ‘chiefly, if not wholly’ the invention of Macpherson (xxii). A footnote reacts to the earlier controversy, before making the case for a study of more recent Gaelic song – the poetry of the fifth century might not be recoverable, but some ‘person of integrity and abilities, possessed of a competent knowledge of the language, who should prefer fact to opinion, authority to conjecture, and fidelity to fine writing’ might be able to investigate the songs of living speakers of Celtic languages (xxxiv). It is only once this earlier history has been dealt with that the subject of this essay, and this collection, can be established: ‘The song therefor which is meant to be the subject of this essay is that of the natives of Scotland speaking and writing the English language’ (xxiii).

As Ritson traces the early history of Scottish song, the history of battles and significant events is entwined with a history of the songs that recorded and responded to them, and a list of the surviving sources that Ritson has been able to locate. Although relatively little could be gleaned from the British Museum, he is able to

identify and describe some manuscript sources, including Royal MS 17.D.XX, one of the copies of the chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun, which was being edited at that time by David Macpherson (Ritson first examined it briefly in March of 1777, and requested it again in May of 1794). When poetry that cannot be claimed as song is discussed, readers are directed to ‘*The Caledonian Muse* (when published)’, and this work haunts the collection (xxx). Ritson draws heavily upon the Maitland and Bannatyne manuscripts, although his use of these was hampered by the difficulty of traveling to Cambridge or Edinburgh, leading to the galling situation of being forced to admit that Pinkerton had been able to edit and publish relevant works from the Maitland manuscripts before he had been able to.

When the essay reaches the seventeenth century, it begins to function as a history of printed collections of Scottish songs, the primary sources for this collection, beginning with ‘A sort of music book, printed (for the second time) at Aberdeen, in 1666, intituled “*Cantus*; songs and fancies, to three, four or five parts, both apt for voices and viols,”’ identified by Ritson as ‘the first known collection of Scottish songs, or rather in which Scottish songs are to be found’ (lvii-lviii). *Hardyknute* is identified as ‘a palpable and bungling forgery’ despite its inclusion in the *Ever green*, leading to the reflection that ‘Why the Scottish literati should be more particularly addicted to literary imposition than those of any other country, might be a curious subject of investigation for their new Royal society’ (lxii-lxiii). The *Teatable Miscellany* ensures ‘the preservation of several old Scottish songs of great merit, of which no earlier copies are now to be found’ as well as providing ‘many excellent originals written, as it seems, either by himself or others, purposely for this publication’ (lxiii). While Ramsay is an excellent, and possibly unrivalled, poet, as an editor, he is, perhaps, reprehensible, not only on account of the liberties he appears to have taken with many of their earlier piece he published, in printing them with additions, which one is unable to distinguish, but also for preferring songs written by himself, or the “ingenious young gentlemen” who assisted him, to ancient and original words, which would in many cases, all circumstances considered, have been probably superior, or, at least, much more curious, and which are now irretrievable. (lxiv-lxv)

The survival of early material is contingent upon decisions made in the recent past, and material that Ramsay had access to could be irretrievably lost by the time Ritson began his research. Although the nameable authors of lyric poetry provide a small minority of the songs in the collection, they play a prominent role in the historical essay. Within the collection their works are separated and presented according to the internal arrangement of each class. Within the essay, they are placed within a narrative history, tracing the development of Scottish writing over time. The eighteenth century is presented as a catalogue of authors: Ramsay, Crawford, Hamilton of Bangour, Mallet, Lord Binning, Smollet, Alexander Robertson, Thomson, Alexander Ross, Thomas Blacklock, Alexander Webster, Robert Fergusson, and, finally, Robert Burns, ‘a natural poet of the first eminence’ although he ‘does not, perhaps, appear to his usual advantage in song’ (lxxv). The ‘fair sex’ can add further names to the list, ‘some of the finest lyric compositions of Scotland’ being produced by Miss Home, Lady Grissel Baillie, and Lady Ann Lindsay (lxxvii). Like Ramsay, Burns is identified as an excellent poet but ‘it must be regretted, an equally licentious and unfaithful publisher of the performances of others. Many of the original, old, ancient, genuine songs inserted in Johnsons *Scots musical museum* derive no little of their merit from passing through the hands of this very ingenious critic’ (lxxv).

Although Ritson praises Scottish lyric poets, he is ambivalent about their place in a history of national song:

One cannot, however, adduce the performance of scholars and distinguished individuals, as specimens of national song. The genuine and peculiar natural song of Scotland is to be sought – not in the works of Hamilton, Thomson, Smollett, or even Ramsay; but – in the productions of obscure or anonymous authors, of shepherds and milk maids, who actually felt the sensations they describe; of those, in short, who were destitute of all the advantages of science and education, and perhaps incapable of committing the pure inspirations of nature to writing. (lxxix)

In the *English Songs*, Ritson had distinguished between literary lyric poetry and a popular printed broadside tradition. In the *Scottish Songs* he distinguishes between a

literary tradition and an oral tradition. Yet it is only when songs have been committed to writing that they become something that Ritson can study and include in his collection, and so he is dependent upon works such as Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scots Songs*. While an oral culture can produce the best songs, it cannot, as Ritson understands it, preserve them, and so 'Tradition, in short, is a species of alchemy which converts gold to lead' (lxxxix).

**'at present almost beyond the reach of conjecture'**

The preface to the collection begins with the statement that 'the words and melody of a Scottish song should be ever inseparable' (i). However, as in the *English Songs*, this simple statement becomes more complex in practice. The portion of the essay which deals with the history of Scottish music must deal with even sparser material than the early history of lyric poetry:

By whom, or under what circumstances, the original or most ancient Scottish tunes were invented or composed, it is now perhaps impossible to ascertain. The previous step, however, to an inquiry of this nature, will be to determine, which of the airs now extant are to be considered as the original or most ancient. (lxxxii)

Ritson presents, with some amount of deference, the arguments of the recently deceased Tytler, even printing melodies he had collected 'here inserted as proofs of the doctrine he has advanced, from copies obligingly communicated by himself' (lxxxv). However, the more sceptical Ritson is not convinced, and must admit that

with respect to the melodies selected by Mr. Tytler, in support of his hypothesis, their antiquity is so far from being "undoubted," that it seems altogether imaginary and chimerical. We by no means deny that the Scots either had or have ancient tunes or songs; we only (to adopt the words of bishop Stillingfleet) "desire to be better acquainted with them." (lxxxv)

Ritson must rely on indirect evidence, on descriptions of songs or singing in historical works, but the exact nature of the music which must have existed 'is at present almost beyond the reach of conjecture' (xci). When information begins to become available, in the sixteenth century, Ritson is cautious, concluding that 'it is

uncertain whether the air to which *Robs Jock* is sung or chanted be coeval with the original words, which appear to have been popular in 1578. Could the point be ascertained, it is probably one of the oldest Scottish song-tunes now extant' (ciii). Other songs whose texts can be firmly placed in the sixteenth century are 'probably genuine specimens of ancient Scottish melody' (ciii).

The Aberdeen collection of 1666, he argues, contains songs that were certainly current earlier, but how much earlier is difficult to establish, and 'no direct evidence, it is believed, can be produced of the existence of any Scottish tune, now known, prior to the year 1660, exclusive of such as are already mentioned; nor is any one, even of those, to be found noted, either in print or manuscript, before that period' (cv). Ramsay's editorial practice complicates the status of the *Tea-table miscellany* as evidence of earlier tunes. The first printed music that Ritson is able to locate is William Thomson's *Orpheus Caledonius* in 1725, expanded and revised in 1733, (Ritson was not impressed by the selection) followed by Oswald's *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (1750) (cvi-cviii). Both works used engraved music, although in different ways, the *Orpheus Caledonius* an expensive work published by subscription, anticipating the format of the *Scots Musical Museum*, and the *Caledonian Pocket Companion* containing only the music. A more detailed study of the history of Scottish music is beyond the scope of his essay, and so is left to future antiquaries:

The object of the preceding enquiry has been to discover facts, not to indulge conjecture. Those songs and tunes, therefor, of which intrinsic evidence alone may be supposed to ascertain the age, are left to the genius and judgement of the connoisseur.... It is however hoped that the future researches of the antiquaries of Scotland will be so diligent and successful as to leave no doubts either on this or any other branch of their national antiquities. (cix-cx)

Ritson has the expertise necessary to accurately date medieval English texts using 'intrinsic evidence alone', but he does not claim to have a similar knowledge of early music, though he understands that others may.

The ‘historical essay’ offers a brief description of what is known about the history of instruments in Scotland – ‘a few words should, but a few can, be added’ – before concluding:

In the hope that this investigation, which, dry, tedious, and imperfect as it is, will, perhaps, be occasionally found to throw a glimmering light upon a subject hitherto obscure, may hereafter provoke the exertions of some person qualified, in point of erudition, information, musical knowledge, taste, and language, to do it justice, these pages are concluded with satisfaction. (xci, cxix)

Throughout his essay, Ritson presents the study of Scottish song as a collaborative enterprise: he relies upon the work of his predecessors and the help of his contemporaries, and his work may be of use in the future.

**‘The selection he now offers to the public’**

Although the internal arrangement of the collection is not as elaborate as in the earlier *Select Collection*, the one hundred and seventy one songs are deliberately and carefully organized into four classes. Unlike the *Select Collection*, but like the *Ancient Songs* and the *English Anthology*, Ritson lists the authorities for his collection, although he does so in a singularly unwieldy format. He promises strict, but sensible, accuracy:

The orthography of each song is that of the authority from which it is taken, and which (unless, perhaps in a single instance) has never been intentionally deserted, except where an evident typographical error, or slip of the pen, may have occasioned a correction, of which the reader will be apprised by the usual distinction. This scrupulous adherence to the copies made use of requires that they should be accurately described. (ii)

The preface provides a long prose description of his authorities, which is only comprehensible when cross-referenced with the authors listed before each song and the history of printed collections provided in the essay. For example, the list of authorities for class I (Love-Songs) begins as follows:



In class I. songs I.XX. XXVII. XXXIII. XXXV. and LXVIII are taken from the authors *Poems*, Edinburgh, 1760; songs II. VI. VIII. X. XII. XIII. LI. and LIII. From the author's *Poems*, London, 1731; songs III. IV. V. VII. XXV. V. XXVIII. XXXVIII. XLIII. XLVII. LV. LIX. LX. LXIII. LXV. and LXX. From Ramsays *Tea-table miscellany*, 1750...

The authorities identified by Ritson reveal a great deal about the composition of the collection. Nearly two thirds of the songs are drawn from other eighteenth-century collections, and the one seventeenth-century collection he identified in the essay.

These are, in descending order of the number of selections taken from them, as Ritson describes them:

44: Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, 1769 and 1776

37: Ramsay's *Tea-table miscellany*, 1750

7: Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*

6: Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1775

5: *A Collection of Loyal Songs*, 1750

3: Napier's *Collection of Scots Songs*

2: *A Chose Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*, Edinburgh, 1711, collated with Ramsay's *Tea-table miscellany*.

2: *Songs and Fancies*, Aberdeen, 1666

2: *The Ever Green*, Edinburgh 1724

1: Evans' *Old Ballads*, London, 1777

1: *True Loyalist or Chevaliers Favourite*, 1779

In his collection, Ritson builds upon an existing body of work on Scottish songs, producing a new work by selecting the best (by his own criteria) from other collections, removing them from one context and recombining them with the most appropriate printed music to produce a new work. Two are taken from magazines, the December, 1773 issue of the *Edinburgh Magazine* and Vol XI of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1741). Some authorities are given only a vague description: 'a modern stall copy', 'a single engraved sheet', 'a stall copy', 'an engraved sheet', 'common collections', 'common collections of which the names have not been reserved'. Of the one hundred and seventy one songs, only forty-nine have identifiable authors, although these are provided with an index, and, as discussed

above, are given particular attention in the essay. Some are taken from the collected poems or works of an author or authoress, as described by Ritson:

Catherine Cockburn's *Works* 1751

William Hamilton's *Poems*, Edinburgh, 1760

Alan Ramsay's *Poems*, London, 1731

John Logan's *Poems*, London, 1781

David Mallet's *Works*, London, 1759

Robert Burns' *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, Edinburgh 1787

Alexander Ross's *Fortunate Shepherdess*, Aberdeen, 1768

James Thomson's *Works*, 1762

Two songs are taken from *Roderick Random*. Ritson brings together songs from very different eighteenth-century print contexts, demanding that they all be considered within a tradition of 'Scottish Songs' and the historical background established in the essay.

A few texts are taken from manuscripts. Two are taken from the British Museum, Sloane 1489, and Harley 7332. Three are taken from the Bannatyne manuscript in the Advocates' Library (here referred to as the Hyndford manuscript after its former owner). After Ritson returned from his first trip to Cambridge in 1782, he wrote to Harrison to report on his findings, mentioning in passing his examination of the Maitland MS, and inquiring after the possibility of getting 'a sight of Lord Hyndfords MS. without going to Edinburgh, (where I see very little probability of my getting in haste) (I:58). However, by the beginning of 1793, Ritson wrote George Paton, thanking him for his help with a 'list of old Scottish words', and informing him that:

You must cease to consider Lord Hailes as a *most faithful publisher*; as I who have collated many of his articles with the Bannatyne MS. know to my cost. I do not, indeed, mean to say that he is so intentionally faithless as Ramsay; but I do say that his transcripts have been very inaccurate, that he has in numerous instances wilfully altered the original orthography, and not infrequently misinterpreted the text of the MS. which I suspect he was occasionally unable to read. (II:2)

Accurately reading and transcribing unfamiliar manuscripts was a skill, and publications could only be as faithful as the intermediate transcripts. Ritson had been able to visit Edinburgh and the Advocates' Library, making the examination of the manuscript sources that was necessary for his research. His trips were not uniformly productive, as he found when he wished to consult the Chepman and Myllar prints. Although the majority of Ritson's texts are taken from print sources, a few gesture towards an earlier stage of manuscript and oral transmission, attributed to 'a manuscript copy transmitted by mr. Tytler', 'A manuscript copy transmitted from Scotland', and 'A manuscript copy, as dictated to the editor many years ago by a young gentleman, who had it from his grandfather'. However, it is only when the oral song has been recorded that it could function as an authority of Ritson.

A combination of text and music was essential to the collection, but, as with the *Select Collection*, this could be difficult in practice. Unlike the *Select Collection*, but like the *Anthologie Française*, the music is printed with the text. When the same air is used for more than one text, it is only printed once, with a note directing the reader to where it is included. This happens on twelve occasions. When music which must exist cannot be found, 'blank lines are left for its after insertion with the pen' (vi). This occurs on only twenty-five occasions, providing a much smaller proportion of texts without music than the earlier collections.

Of the airs, thirty-four are given a name, including the redundant airs that are cross-referenced (e.g. 'Tune, *Gillcrankie*' identifies both a song by Burns and a ballad by Arthur Skirving included in Herd's collection). Eight are attributed to a composer. These include four set by Shield for this collection, 'whose taste and science have been occasionally exerted in restoring or preserving the genuine simplicity of a corrupted melody, and of whose friendship the editor is happy to boast this testimony' (vii). Shield composed music for four different recent literary works:

Smollett's 'On Celia Playing on the Harpsicord and Singing',  
extracted from *Roderick Random* (Class I, IX)

William Falconer's 'An Address to His Mistress', taken from the  
*Edinburgh Magazine* of December, 1773 (Class I, XVII)

William Hamilton's 'Go, plaintive sounds, and to the fair' from his *Poems on Several Occasions*, Edinburgh, 1760, one of a number of texts in that work that classified generically as songs. (Class I, XX)

Catherine Cockburn's 'The Vain Advice' from *The Works of Mrs. Catherine Cockburn*, London, 1751. (Class I, Song XXXI)

In each case, the text was extracted from a very different context, and claimed to serve a different purpose, as an example of a Scottish love song. Cockburn's 'The Vain Advice' had also been included in the *Select Collection*, as song six in the first class, with no air known to Ritson at that time.

One difference between the English and Scottish collections was the inclusion of a class of political songs in the latter. In the English collection, political songs had been rejected, on the grounds that their interest could only be ephemeral. They are included in the *Ancient Songs*, serving as a historical record rather than timeless elegant works. For this class, Ritson selects forty songs, from a variety of sources. They are arranged chronologically, not by date of composition or surviving copies, but by content, creating a verse history from the battle of Flodden Field to the present day. The selections in this class are heavily annotated, with notes identifying historical figures, places, and events, and directing readers to other sources.

Within the essay, political events are presented in terms of the poetic response to them. The restoration 'however grateful it might be to a people always strongly attached to their hereditary monarchy, does not appear to have been much celebrated by the muses', while 1715 'seems to have roused the poetic even more than the military spirit of the Scots' and '1745, seems to have been hailed by the Scottish muse with her most brilliant strains' (lix, lxi, lxviii). These works are dangerously close to the present:

To offer any apology for the republication of these political effusions would be to insult those who might be suspected to require it. The rival claims of *Stewart* and *Brunswick* are not more to the present generation than those of *Bruce* and *Baliol*, or *York* and *Lancaster*. The question of RIGHT has been submitted to the arbitration of the

SWORD, and is now irrevocably decided: but neither that decision, nor any other motive, should deter the historian from doing justice to the character of those brave men who fell in a cause which they, at least, thought right, and which others, perhaps, only think wrong, as it proved unsuccessful. (lxix)

The selection of texts has decidedly Jacobite bent. In some cases, works are extracted from earlier collections, with works beginning ‘You’re welcome Charley Stuart’, ‘Through Geordie reigns in Jamie’s stead’, and ‘Oh! how shall I venture, or dare to reveal / too great for expression, too good to conceal, / The graces and virtues that illustriously shine / In the prince that’s descended from the Stuart’s great line!’ taken from a work identified only as ‘a collection of *Loyal Songs*, etc. 1750’ (II:99-105).

The class concludes with two recent works. Robert Burns’s ‘Fragment’ beginning ‘When Guilford good our pilot stood’, taken from the Edinburgh edition of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* provides the penultimate selection. A note reminds readers that ‘The events and allusions which form the subject of this song, are too recent and familiar to need a comment’ (II:123). The final selection is an extract from James’ Thomson’s *Masque of Alfred* (taken from 1762 edition of Thomson’s *Works*) with an air set by Dr. Arne, here untitled, but better known as ‘Rule Britannia’. Ritson demands that these songs be read as Scottish songs, and as the product of a long tradition of political song in Scotland. As in his other collections, Ritson does not merely attempt to recover the past, but links the past and the present, constructing a tradition within which contemporary poetry and song can be understood.

### **The Caledonian Muse**

In his work on Scottish material, Ritson relied heavily on assistance from a number of contacts in Edinburgh, most of whom were involved with the newly established Society of Scottish Antiquaries. Describing the fate of antiquarian societies in this period, Sweet identifies the Society of Scottish Antiquaries as something of a failure: ‘founded in 1780 and incorporated in 1783 its existence had come about primarily upon the whim of its founder, the earl of Buchan, rather than out of a gathering of like-minded individuals’ and failed to gain wider support (111).

Sweet attributes the limited success of the society to the social makeup of its members in this period:

Buchan's experience also highlights again the importance of exercising a discriminatory policy over candidacy for membership; a delicate balancing act between raw numbers, talent and social status had to be performed. He managed initially to sign up a distinguished roster of people for membership, including the third earl of Bute, whom he persuaded to take on the role of president. Few of these, however, attended the meetings, and the political controversy which surrounded Buchan's provocative campaign to acquire incorporation ensured that many of the Edinburgh social and intellectual elite would have nothing to do with the new society. Buchan was therefore dependent upon the support of less socially distinguished personages drawn from the trading and professional classes. George Paton, an excise official and Richard Gough's indispensable informant on matters antiquarian in Scotland, was a member, but seldom attended. William Smellie, who became secretary in 1790, was a noted natural historian...but by trade he was a printer. Only four years earlier Jeremiah Milles, president of the London society, had objected to proposed candidacy of another well-known printer, John Nichols. However, Nichols was granted honorary membership of the Scottish society....Critics claimed that Buchan had established a society of 'ragamuffins'. (113-114)

Although this was not the ideal composition for the long-term health of the society, it was the perfect group for Ritson (who would certainly never be let anywhere near the London society). Paton was a frequent correspondent, and relayed information, assistance and praise between Ritson and Herd (*Letters* II: 64). William Tytler provided a great deal of assistance to Ritson both before and after his death in 1792, as his son provided Ritson with many of his relevant papers (Bronson 192). Tytler was the vice-president of the Scottish Society when it was founded, and the *Transactions of the Scottish Society of Antiquaries* provided one of the venues for his 'Dissertation on the Scottish Music' (Mackay). Ritson corresponded with the

bookseller William Laing, who seems to have assisted with the distribution of his works in Scotland, including fifty copies of the *Scottish Songs*: ‘twelve you take yourself; five you will present, with the Editors compliments, to Mr. Fraser Tytler, Mr. Allan, Mr. Brown, Mr. Paton and Mr. Campbell – that is one to each; the rest you will sell on my account, if you can’ (*Letters* II:47). Laing provided Ritson with gossip about the activities of Scottish antiquaries, including the death of James Cummyngs and the works being sold in Edinburgh (36). Ritson even asked Laing to enquire at the Advocate’s Library, to see if the Chepman and Myllar prints had been returned (21). Ritson’s references in the essay to the work which might be done by the Scottish antiquaries gestures towards this circle.

Like his other work, Ritson’s engagement with Scottish poetry and song was shaped by both collaboration and controversy. Over time, he found himself engaged in a vicious conflict with John Pinkerton on many fronts. This controversy has tended to overshadow Ritson’s simultaneous friendly and productive relationships with a network of Scottish antiquaries from a wide range of backgrounds. Ritson’s conflicts with Pinkerton are too complex to address fully in the space available here. Pinkerton committed many actions, and held many views, any one of which would have ensured Ritson’s enmity. Ritson’s feud with Pinkerton was qualitatively different from his attacks on Warton, Percy, or Malone. In those cases, he attacked an established figure in a quasi-oedipal strategy for advancement. Pinkerton was his contemporary and a direct competitor. While Ritson had introduced himself to the literary antiquarian world by attacking Thomas Warton, Pinkerton had begun by composing verse in the style of old ballads and ‘tried to pawn off his concoctions as traditional ballads’ mixing his own compositions in with genuine works when sending them to publishers and to Percy (O’Flaherty 10-12). Ritson sent a brutally disparaging letter to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, identifying Pinkerton as one of a long line of Scottish literary frauds, signing the letter ‘Anti-Scot’ (Bronson 116-117). Even when Pinkerton began to establish himself as a serious historian, he and Ritson entrenched themselves on opposite sides of the debates over the origins of the Picts, a conflict parodied in Scott’s *Antiquary* when the social antiquarianism between Oldbuck and his friend Sir Arthur breaks down over the etymology of the only word

they have, disintegrating until they simply shout the names of opposing scholars at one another, culminating with decisive ‘Ritson has no doubts!’ (48 Ch. 6).

Each identified the Maitland manuscript as a significant and underused resource in the early 1780s, yet each struggled to get to Cambridge to make the necessary transcripts, Pinkerton outpacing Ritson to publish *Ancient Scottish Poems* in 1786 (O’Flaherty 22-23, 35). This was galling, but actually offensive was Pinkerton’s inclusion of the *Awntyrs of Arthure*, under the title of ‘Sir Gawan and Sir Galaron of Galloway’ in his *Scottish Poems* of 1792. The manuscript of this text was one of the few personally owned by Ritson, having been left to him by his friend John Baynes. However, after Baynes’s death, his executors allowed Francis Douce to make a transcript before the manuscript was given to Ritson. Douce lent this transcript to Pinkerton, on the condition that it not be published. Pinkerton applied to Ritson for his consent to the publication, but went ahead despite his refusal. This led to a resumption of the vicious conflict between the two men in the pages of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (Bronson 121, 189-90; O’Flaherty 70-71). Shortly before the *Scottish Songs* were published, Pinkerton joined the *Critical Review*, and Ritson correctly predicted that he would use that position to settle old scores (Bronson 199). The *Scottish Songs* were shaped by this controversy, as in the nested footnotes to the historical essay, yet it should not overshadow the extent to which they demonstrate Ritson’s friendly and collaborative relationships with the Scottish antiquaries.

Ritson’s Scottish work is complicated by its publication history. He planned Scottish companions to his major English works – *A Select Collection of English Songs*, the *English Anthology* and the *Bibliographia Poetica* – and although he completed all three works only the *Scottish Songs* was printed during his lifetime. As discussed in the introduction, the ‘*Bibliographia Scotica*’ circulated in manuscript after his death. The *Caledonian Muse* has a more complex story. Bronson was able to untangle much of its history when he acquired a hybrid manuscript demonstrating the process of Ritson’s revisions. He provides a complete description of this manuscript and his conclusions in his 1931 article ‘The Caledonian Muse’. However, some questions proved intractable. These can now be answered using four letters from Joseph Frank to David Laing, now held by the University of Edinburgh in the Laing Collection (La.IV.17 f.3282-3286). The history of the *Caledonian Muse* provides



evidence of the development of Ritson's understanding of Scottish poetry, and of the ways in which Frank worked to establish his legacy.

The history of the *Caledonian Muse*, as far as Bronson has been able to establish, is as follows. Ritson prepared a collection of Scottish poetry as a companion to the *English Anthology*. A version of this was printed, probably in about 1785 (1203). However, publication was delayed, likely because Ritson continued to make extensive revisions, until a fire at the printing-house destroyed the existing copies, probably in 1794 (1203). Although Ritson reported to some of his Scottish acquaintances, including Paton and Laing, that the text had been entirely destroyed, he was eventually able to recover a complete copy of the work printed in 1785, and at least one other copy survived among the papers of the publisher, Joseph Johnson, although he took no further interest in the work (1201-3). At this point, the history of the *Caledonian Muse* bifurcates.

The copy held by Johnson passed to his successor, Hunter, who sold it to the bookseller Robert Triphook. When Thomas Park produced a new edition of the *English Songs* in 1813, he announced that Triphook planned to 'complete and publish' the work rescued from the flames (1204). Haslewood planned to assist Triphook in revising the text, but this never occurred (1206). In 1821, Triphook published the text as it stood, with the addition of a new title page and the silhouette of Ritson prepared by Mrs. Park (1206). The *Caledonian Muse* as published in 1821 thus represents Ritson's research as it stood in 1785, an incomplete text, lacking whatever changes he had made that delayed its initial publication.

The copy which Ritson was able to recover followed a different path. Ritson continued to make extensive changes. At some point he retitled this work 'Select Scottish Poems' (1207). In 1801, possibly due to an introduction through Walter Scott, Ritson sent the hybrid work, consisting of large portions of both print and manuscript, to Archibald Constable, promising him an added essay and glossary (1207). At the time of Ritson's death, the new work was only partially printed, and Constable abandoned the project, binding together the newly printed proof sheets, Ritson's manuscript notes, and the old pages of the *Caledonian Muse* (1208). At some point, this work was acquired by the collector Bernard Buchanan MacGeorge, along with the majority of Ritson's published texts, including the very rare minor

works, and was sold with the rest of his considerable library after his death in 1924, when it was purchased by Bronson.

The revisions that Ritson made reveal a great deal about how he undertook his research into Scottish poetry between 1785 and 1801, and how he understood the role of the collection that he was attempting to form. As mentioned above, Ritson wrote Paton that he had come to seriously distrust Hailes' transcriptions from the Bannatyne Manuscript. The early copy of the *Caledonian Muse*, and thus the version ultimately printed in 1821, was prepared before he could examine the manuscript itself, and thus relies, either through necessity or ignorance, on Hailes' work. The revised copy demonstrates, as Bronson establishes, Ritson's collation of the manuscript (1206). On the one hand, the collection required an accurate and faithful record of the earliest texts that Ritson could find, as he inserts those texts from medieval manuscript sources that he has been able to identify or consult in the intervening years. On the other, Ritson brought it up to the present day, copying 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' and 'To a Mountain Daisy' from Burn's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* and inserting them into his collection (1212).

Tracing the history of the *Caledonian Muse*, Bronson encountered a further mystery. At some point after Ritson's death, Constable may have lent the book to David Laing, as he makes references to the products of Ritson's late research in his *Select Remains of the Ancient Popular Poetry of Scotland* (1822), a work which has many connections to Ritson. However, some of the evidence is contradictory. Bronson attempts to disentangle the history of this copy after Ritson's death. In the revised 1829 edition of *Ancient Songs*, Frank describes Ritson's additions to the *Caledonian Muse*, with an essay and glossary, 'now in the possession of the editor who is preparing the work, in its improved state, for the press', leading Bronson to tentatively conclude that either Constable had not lent the revised text to Laing, if it was in London in 1829, or there were two different revised texts circulating in the nineteenth century:

It is, of course, possible to suppose that Ritson never sent Constable his essay and glossary as he promised...and that Frank at that time had no communication with Constable. In that case, Frank's intentions for the body of the work were based on copy not forwarded to

Constable, the Constable volume remained in Scotland, and may or may not have gone to Laing. For a work so long in progress, it is more than probable, it is (almost) certain, that Ritson made corrections on more than a single copy of the *Muse*: he may have left several sets of copy in varying degrees of correctness and completeness. There is, at any rate, no doubt that the Constable copy represents Ritson's latest wishes with regard to his text; and with the critical apparatus which was in Frank's possession, and which Constable did or did not have, the work might have been completed much as Ritson had finally intended. (1209-10).

Bronson concludes that it is unlikely that Frank ever saw the Constable copy, as it seems to be listed in the sale catalogue of Laing's library from 1879 (1210).

However, letters from Frank to Laing can cut this knot. There was no third copy. Ritson did send the essay and glossary to Constable. Constable did lend his copy to Laing. Laing sent it to Frank, so that it was in his possession in 1829. When Frank, for whatever reason, did not publish the revised work, he returned the Constable copy to Laing, as he had promised, and that copy was purchased by MacGeorge and Bronson in turn. Four short letters survive, from 1825, 1829, 1832, and 1833, although they reference a more extensive correspondence that has since been lost. In the first, dated 28 November 1825, Frank informs Laing:

I return Mr. Ritsons letters, with many thanks for the loan of them. Will you allow me to request that the copies you were so obliging as to undertake to procure for me from the Advocates Library may be transcribed on separate sheets....The inclosed scanty "Materials for the life of Dunbar" is the only scrap left by Mr. Ritson on the subject of your enquiry. (La.IV.17 f.3283)

The letters referred to are most likely Ritson's letters to David Laing's father, William, which are included in Ritson's published *Letters*. As he had done nearly twenty years earlier, in the exchange with Scott, Frank requested his uncle's letters and provided Laing with the surviving fragments of Ritson's research that could assist him in his own publications. Laing's *Poems of William Dunbar, now first collected* were published in 1834, and he relies on Ritson's work, although not the

material sent to him by Frank, but the ‘Bibliographia Scotica’ held by George Chalmers, lent to him by Chalmers’ nephew, as Laing explains in the preface to that work (xiii). Ritson’s unpublished material continued to circulate within collaborative networks long after his death. Within some expert circles, Ritson was known as an authority on the early poetry and song of Scotland.

The second letter is dated 16 October 1829:

I am greatly indebted for the interesting fragments of “The Caledonian Muse,” which I should be sorry to rob you of, and will return in safety at some favourable opportunity; and your own reprint of “Susane”, and copy of Mr. Ritson’s letter to poor Constable were very acceptable additions to the obligation: I shall now be able, I find, to give a complete edition of the work, precisely as Mr. R. intended it to be, with the exception of the copper-plates and wood-cuts; for those I fear are utterly irretrievable. With respect to “Susane”, the Vernon MS. seems much superior to the imperfect copy in the Museum, which, upon a slight inspection some years since, appeared to me of a later age and loosely written. Of Mr. Douce’s MS., of course, I know nothing, but should be most happy to learn its age and authority, and to have a sight of your copies or extracts from both, to pick out any improved readings.

In Watsons “Scots poems” 1713 is a “Poem” by the Marquis of Montrose, which Mr. R. meant to include in his Selection; and as the book will probably be found in the Advocates Library, or some other collection of Edinburgh, may I venture to trespass upon your kindness in procuring me a copy of it, to insert in its proper place.

In regard to advertising the “Annals,” in Scotland, I leave it entirely to your own discretion. I sent it on publication to half a dozen of the principal papers in this country; and am the less inclined to incur expense in this way, having no doubt of its ultimate, though slow success. I shall be glad to see the criticism in the Edinburgh Literary Gazette: The article in the Quarterly is more favourable than I should have expected; but they intirely omit to mention the “Introduction” to

each division, which, in my opinion, forms the most valuable part of the work. (La.IV.17 f.3284)

Laing had sent Frank the Constable copy of the ‘Caledonian Muse’, and, as Frank had reported in the revised *Ancient Songs and Ballads*, he was beginning to revise it for publication, although he has promised to return it to Laing. An edition of *The Pystel of Swete Susan* taken from the Vernon manuscript had been one of the key additions to the revised *Caledonian Muse*. Laing included this text in his *Select Remains of the Ancient Popular Poetry of Scotland*, with an introduction explaining that Ritson had nearly gotten it through the press when he died:

it is a matter of regret, that this little volume should have been left unfinished. The care and fidelity exhibited in what he has done, is beyond all praise, and might have served as a guide to editors who have since been engaged in similar publications. We owe much to the zeal which *Ritson* showed towards the remains of our ancient poetry at a time when they were disregarded and overlooked by our countrymen. (n.p.)

Laing approaches Ritson from a Scottish perspective, demonstrating the relevance of his work twenty years after his death. More than thirty years earlier, Ritson had asked William Laing to procure transcripts from the Advocates’ Library for him, and Frank makes the same request of his son.

The third letter, dated 6 November 1832, is brief, simply alerting Laing to the publication of the new edition of *Robin Hood* and confessing that Frank had been too optimistic about the sale of the *Annals of the Caledonians, Picts, and Scots* (1828), and so has an account to settle with Laing (La.IV.17 f.3284). The final letter, dated 24 July 1833, provides a few updates about the publication and sale of Ritson’s works:

I beg your acceptance of the inclosed Collection of Mr. Ritson’s Letters, and the new (and, I hope you will think, improved) edition of his “Popular Poetry”, for which I have heard you express considerable partiality.

Will you have the goodness to favour me with the statement promised in your letter of 22<sup>nd</sup> December last – even if not a copy of the Annals

have been disposed of —: being so inclined to constitute my publisher Mr. Pickering the general depository of all, or most, of the unsold copies of Mr. Ritson's works, as affording greater facility of sale.  
(La.IV.17 f.3285)

The letters which Frank had been preparing for decades, and which Laing had contributed to, providing his father's letters and the one letter to Constable included in the collection, were finally published. Ritson's works continued to be republished, though they evidently did not sell as well as Frank hoped. There is still no clue to when and why Frank abandoned the *Caledonian Muse*.

As a young man in Stockton-on-Tees, Ritson had established links with a network of local antiquaries, exchanging information and favours. After moving to London, he maintained these connections, while establishing new friendships, with literary antiquaries such as Baynes, Farmer, Steevens, and Reed, and new feuds, with Percy, Warton, and Malone. To pursue his research on Scottish material, Ritson established connections with Scottish antiquaries, and began a feud with Pinkerton. Near the end of his life, Ritson made a number of new connections, joining an emerging group of scholars studying and publishing medieval romance at the turn of the century.

## Chapter 6: Romanceës

**‘English literature and English poetry suffer, while so many pieces of this kind still remain concealed and forgotten in our manuscript libraries’**

In 1765, Thomas Percy introduced the third volume of his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* with an essay ‘On the Ancient Metrical Romances’, concluding the essay by making a case for the publication of an edited collection of these texts, and offering a list of the texts known to him:

As many of these metrical histories and romances contain a considerable portion of poetic merit, and throw great light on the manners and opinions of former times, it were to be wished that some of the best of them were rescued from oblivion. A judicious collection of them, accurately published, with proper illustrations, would be an important accession to our stock of ancient English literature. Many of them exhibit no mean attempts at epic poetry, and though full of the exploded fictions of chivalry, frequently display great and inventive powers in the bards who composed them. They are at least generally equal to any other poetry of the same age. They cannot indeed be put in competition with the nervous productions of so universal and commanding a genius as Chaucer; but they have a simplicity that makes them be read with less interruption, and be more easily understood: and they are far more spirited and entertaining than the tedious allegories of Gower, or the dull and prolix legends of Lydgate: yet, while so much stress is laid upon the writings of these last, by such as treat of English poetry, the old metrical romances, though far more popular in their time, are hardly known to exist...Should the public encourage the revival of some of those ancient epic songs of chivalry, they would frequently see the rich ore of an Ariosto or Tasso, though buried, it may be, among the rubbish and dross of barbarous times.

Such a publication would answer many important uses: it would throw new light on the rise and progress of English poetry, the history of which can be but imperfectly understood, if these are neglected; it

would also serve to illustrate innumerable passages in our ancient classic poets, which, without their help, must be for ever obscure. (III: viii-ix)

This extract encapsulates the late eighteenth-century approach to medieval romance. Any attention to an obscure and barbarous subject must be justified through its utility. The texts are approached as potentially entertaining and enjoyable poetry, yet in ways that must be justified and qualified. Although ancient poems might ‘contain a considerable portion of poetic merit’, ‘display great and inventive powers’ and be found entertaining, their significance lies in their utility. They provide a historical record of ‘manners and opinions’ and of ‘the rise and progress of English poetry’. Moreover, Percy outlines the role that a collection of metrical romances could play when incorporated into ‘our stock of ancient English literature’. Although they are not among ‘our ancient classic poets’, a category that had emerged over the course of the eighteenth century, these more marginal texts could be used to understand the vernacular classics, as when Thomas Warton had identified medieval allusions in Spenser (Percy continues his justification with a demonstration of how knowledge of these texts could be applied to clarify allusions in Shakespeare). The romances are explicitly defined as neglected texts, and an argument made that they deserve attention – more attention, in fact, than the texts that are currently known and studied. A collection of romances, carefully selected, could provide a very different picture of the middle ages, and of early English literature, than the continued study of Gower and Lydgate, creating a past characterized by chivalry rather than monastic moralizing. The call for a ‘judicious collection’ of medieval romances was repeated in the editions of 1767, 1775, and 1794, with no significant changes, although the rest of the essay changed considerably. Yet public encouragement for the publication of such a collection was apparently not forthcoming.

In 1774, Thomas Warton incorporated a discussion of many of the romances identified by Percy into the first volume of his *History of English Poetry*. Further discussion of medieval romance was incorporated into later volumes, disrupting the chronological progression of the *History*. Warton provided extracts from and descriptions of several texts, although neither a comprehensive list nor the publication of complete texts was within the scope of his project:



I could give many more ample specimens of the romantic poems of these nameless minstrels.... But it is neither my inclination nor intention to write a catalogue, or compile a miscellany. It is not to be expected that this work should be a general repository of our antient poetry. I cannot however help observing, that English literature and English poetry suffer, while so many pieces of this kind still remain concealed and forgotten in our manuscript libraries. (I: 207-209)

When Joseph Ritson challenged Warton in his *Observations*, he was ruthless in his identification of Warton's sloppiness in his use of manuscript sources. Ritson built his reputation upon a demonstration that he had already begun a painstaking study of the texts 'concealed and forgotten in our manuscript libraries' that remained, in a phrase used by both Percy and Warton, to be 'rescued from oblivion' (*Reliques* III: viii; *History of English Poetry* I: viii).

For many of the men involved in the study and publication of early vernacular literature during the romantic period, their work was understood and discussed as an ongoing project of rescuing texts from libraries. In the dramatically expanded second edition of his *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (1801), George Ellis follows a brief chapter on Anglo-Saxon poetry with an examination of the surviving early Anglo-Norman manuscripts, largely derived from the work undertaken by Gervais de la Rue during his exile in London and published in *Archaeologia*. Ellis concludes with a plea for complete editions of medieval vernacular literary texts:

But it is not sufficient that the mines of literature contained in our public libraries, should be distinctly pointed out, unless some steps are taken to render them generally useful.... A printed copy of the works of the Norman poets, or at least of a copious and well selected extract from them, would be a most valuable present to the public; and, indeed it is only in this shape that they can be very generally useful: because the difficulty of the old manuscript characters is a permanent tax on the ingenuity of each successive student; it is in every case a delay to the gratification of his curiosity; and the talent of deciphering obsolete characters is not necessarily attached to the power of

profiting by the information which is concealed under them. Besides, a scarce and valuable manuscript cannot possibly be put into general circulation; and many learned men are necessarily debarred, either by distance, or by infirmity, or by the pressure and variety of their occupations, from spending much time in those public repositories of learning, to which the access has indeed been rendered easy, but could not be made convenient, by the liberality of their founders. (I: 58-59)

Public collections, especially the British Museum, make works accessible in ways they never had been before, but still, as Godwin had complained, require at the very least that researchers consult the collections in specific locations, in ways that are not always convenient or even possible. Reading early manuscripts requires the development of practical skills and the investment of time, energy, and expertise to decipher the script and the language. Ritson and Ellis, in different ways, had spent considerable time honing those skills. One purpose of an edition of an early text was to remove some of these challenges. Works such as those of de la Rue, Warton, Percy, and Ellis himself, which identified and described texts, in the course of constructing arguments using those texts as evidence, with occasional extracts, were useful and influential, but could not substitute for complete editions.

Ellis's revised *Specimens of the Early English Poets* is deeply and consciously intertextual, informed by both existing works and those which were planned and in various stages of completion. He builds upon and responds to Warton and Percy, and incorporates Ritson's recent work into his narrative, using the *Ancient Songs* as the acknowledged source for his examples of thirteenth-century lyric, adding his own marginal glosses for a less expert reader (I: 107-111). Ellis takes particular pleasure in announcing forthcoming works. He identifies 'the Gest of King Horn', in Harley 2253, as a significant early English romance, noting that readers can find 'an excellent abridgement of it, together with a considerable extract' in Warton's *History of English Poetry* (I: 106). However, readers would not be reliant on Warton for long, as Ellis announces in the accompanying footnote:

Having procured from the Museum a transcript of this very curious work, I should not have failed to insert it entire, but that I had reason to hope the task of editing it will fall into much better hands. The

reader will certainly learn with pleasure that Mr. Ritson has it in contemplation to publish a series of our old metrical romances, many of which exist only in manuscript. Such a work executed by him, is likely to prove the most valuable repertory of early language and manners that has yet been presented to the public. (I: 106)

The entirety of 'King Horn' would have been very out of place in Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets*. Further announcements are added to the conclusion of the third volume, as he identifies two significant texts – *Sir Tristrem* and *Kyng Alisaunder* – and informs readers that 'I am happy in being able to add, that our stock of ancient English literature, is likely to be soon enriched by accurate editions of both these very interesting works. The former will be published under the direction of Mr. Walter Scott, and the latter by Mr. Park' (III: 409).

Ritson's collection of *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* was finally published in 1802. The 'Advertisement' to the collection opens with the recollection that 'The nature, importance, and utility of such a publication as the present have been display'd to so much advantage by a writeër of the highest eminence for his acquaintance with the subject, and for his ingenuity and taste, that it would be almost an act of injustice to the undertakeing not to make use of such a powerful and elegant recommendation, to which no attempt of the present editour could possibly be equal' (i). Ritson appropriates Percy's call for a 'judicious collection' as the 'Advertisement' to his own collection, positioning his own work as the unwelcome fulfilment of a project begun decades before.

As Ellis had promised, Ritson's collection was the first in a series of publications of and on medieval romance that appeared at the turn of the century. It was quickly followed by Walter Scott's *Sir Tristrem* (1804); Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805) and eventually Henry Weber's *Metrical Romances* (1810). In his examination of the influence of medieval romance on poetic form in the romantic period, Stuart Curran calls attention to this 'deluge' of publications:

These eight years, it is safe to say, are without peer in the history of British literary scholarship; medieval romances might now figure in a

relatively minor role, but especially for this time, their initial publication wholly altered the conception of British literature. (128)

In addition to the published works, a much larger project of publishing and editing medieval romance was planned and begun, but never completed. Ellis's announcements were possible because the men working on medieval romance spoke and wrote to each other, sharing their plans and providing assistance.

Comparisons between the collections of Ritson and Ellis began to appear before Ellis's work was published. The *British Critic* of September 1804 misidentifies the 'Advertisement' taken from Percy as a borrowing from Ellis, lamenting that:

The only thing to be regretted in the matter is, that Ritson, by undertaking the task, took it out of the hands of a man so much more highly qualified for it. Mr. Ellis, in the eloquent recommendation of the design above-cited, meant, as it seems, to prepare the way for such a publication of his own; but hearing that Ritson had embarked in a similar undertaking, he generously relinquished it, and gave all the assistance in his power to one who, in some respects, but little deserved it. (234)

At this point, both men had established reputations, within the narrow field of research into early periods of English literature, allowing the urbane Ellis to be identified as the obvious alternative to Ritson. Ritson's *Romanceës* are evaluated through a lengthy comparison with the as yet hypothetical work by Ellis, and the recently deceased Ritson is condemned for his bad temper, bad manners, and bad taste.

Although their contemporaries saw Ritson and Ellis's works as alternative approaches, in retrospect they seem to belong to very different genres. Ritson's work is recognizable today as a scholarly edition, with a selection of twelve carefully and conservatively edited texts, clearly distinct from his extensive paratext. Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* is quite different, providing prose abstracts interspersed with selected illustrative passages, with a historical introduction. His witty style allows a refined readership to acquire familiarity with medieval romance without needing to read anything distasteful or difficult,

integrating his presentation of the texts and his commentary. In their introductory essays, Ritson is argumentative, antagonistic and abusive, while Ellis is conciliatory and complementary. However, a close examination reveals many underlying similarities, obscured by the exaggerated contrast in their rhetorical strategies. Both works straddle the divide between the eighteenth-century approach, characterized by theoretical debates and the search for ancient origins, and the nineteenth-century's more concrete focus on identifiable texts. Both writers used their opening essays to summarize the scholarship of the previous century, and position themselves relative to their contemporaries. Both engage with the politically charged debates about the degree of linguistic, legal and cultural continuity after the Norman Conquest, reaching surprisingly similar conclusions. Both place considerable emphasis on identifying and interpreting the relationships between different versions of their texts, although this manifests in contradictory ways, given their editorial strategies.

Contemporary rumour linked the production of the two works, claiming that Ellis had facilitated the publication of Ritson's collection, although the details vary, from paying for its publication to delaying his own work to allow Ritson's to be published. Robert Southey advised Coleridge to 'buy the English metrical romances published by Ritson; it is, indeed, a treasure of true old poetry: the expense of publication is defrayed by Ellis' (*Letters of Robert Southey* 14 March 1803). A letter from Thomas Park to Robert Anderson from November of 1801 provides the chief source of this claim, in which Park responds to Anderson's report of the poor behaviour of their mutual acquaintance during his recent visit to Edinburgh, when he had briefly stayed with Anderson before visiting Scott:

I am sorry that he should have given vent to his ill-humour and groundless jealousy on the subject of Alexander, or that he sh<sup>d</sup> have indulged any splenetic feeling against M<sup>r</sup> Ellis, whose conduct in the whole business has been (as I believe it always is) distinguished for liberality and candour, for dignified sensibility & friendly exertion, even toward Ritson himself, whose romances never were likely to see the light, but for his generous interference, nor would have been undertaken by Nicol, but for his immediate application, and all this after he had collected materials himself, at a great expense, for a

similar public<sup>n</sup> & had abandoned his design solely with a view of serving ~~Ritson~~ his Calumniator. (22.4.10, 213v; Bronson 257)<sup>24</sup>

This letter was included in Bronson's biography of Ritson, and the claim that Ellis deferred the publication of his collection as a favour to Ritson has become commonplace in discussion of Ritson's *Romanceës* (257). However, the background for this conflict is often overlooked, and offers a more complex and revealing story.

When Ellis's *Romances* were published in 1805, Scott seized the opportunity to review it along with Ritson's earlier collection for the *Edinburgh Review*. Scott contends that the two works serve complementary functions. Ritson has taken on 'the important task of arranging and correcting the text of these poems', bringing to that task 'industry', 'fidelity', 'acute abilities' and 'intimate acquaintance with every collateral source' (387-413). Ellis has a different objective: 'Mr Ellis voluntarily resigned the object of Mr Ritson's publication, who gave his romances entire to the world; a mode more acceptable, doubtless to the antiquary, though infinitely less interesting and amusing to the general reader, as well as to the editor' (396). Although Ellis's work will inevitably prove more popular, it will 'not supersede a complete edition': rather, 'the wit and elegance with which he has abridged and analyzed their contents, will encourage many a gentle reader to attempt the originals, who would before have as soon thought of wearing the dress, as of studying the poems of his ancestors' (396).

As David Matthews outlines in *The Making of Middle English*, before the second half of the century, 'Middle English was almost entirely the preserve of the few, not because of a high cultural valuation . . . but because of its insignificance in the eyes of many' (xxii). Those who worked on medieval literary texts were amateurs, operating outside institutional and disciplinary frameworks. Matthews argues that although this might suggest 'apparently utopian possibilities', in practice these scholars had to rely on either patronage or sales (9). As there was not enough

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<sup>24</sup> Bronson has identified all the passages Park's surviving letters to Anderson that refer directly to Ritson, and all of these can be found in his biography. However, the letters themselves do provide small but striking details, such as Park's revision of 'his calumniator', or instances when the surviving letter bears Ellis's frank. I will provide both the reference to the manuscript letters and Bronson's more accessible extracts where appropriate, although they do not always exactly align.

popular support for editions to be viable, after 1812 the publication of medieval texts in Britain became the work of private clubs, removing the need to appeal to an audience in favour of a deliberately limited circulation, often resulting in shoddy scholarship (85-109). The idea that the accurate publication of medieval texts was of national importance and should be supported (since it could not be accomplished by individuals working for a market) did not reach fruition for several decades, with the development of the Surtees Society, the Camden Society and, ultimately, the Early English Text Society (113-61).

Scott's review responds directly to the situation described by Matthews, expressing both frustration and a cautious optimism. Defending the historical and literary importance of the metrical romances, he declares: 'With such ideas of the importance of these ancient legends of chivalry, we are bound to express our gratitude to those by whose labours they have been drawn from the dusty and chaotic confusion of public libraries, and presented to the public in legible and attainable shape'(388). This is what Ritson accomplishes, and whatever his faults, Scott argues, let it be remembered to his honour, that, without the encouragement of private patronage, or of public applause; without hopes of gain, and under the certainty of severe critical censure, he has brought forward such a work on national antiquities, as in other countries has been thought worthy of the labour of universities, and the countenance of princes. (395)

Without patronage or institutional support, potential editors must appeal to public taste, and Ellis's popularizing role becomes essential. Scott is cautiously optimistic:

Notwithstanding this ingenious and lively publication, we still desire even the more to see a genuine edition of these ancient poems. It is painful to reflect, that they, with many unedited chronicles, the materials of our national history, are lying unhonoured and unconsulted amid the rubbish of large libraries. The indifferent sale of Mr Ritson's work may discourage individuals; but surely the object is worth the attention of the English universities. (413)

Unfortunately this attention was not forthcoming, and many romances and chronicles remained in the libraries for some time.

Despite Scott's hopes, even Ellis's popularization failed to create enough of a market to support editions of medieval romance prepared by individual scholars. Ambitious plans made by John Leyden to edit texts from the Auchinleck and other manuscripts in the Advocates' Library, which will be explored below, were cut short when he travelled to India. After Ritson's death, Percy wrote to Park, offering him the use of his manuscripts to continue Ritson's project. Park declined, explaining that 'I think Ritson's plan injudicious, and his execution of it repulsive; whence his book is likely to prove unsaleable' (Bronson 297). Ellis, having finally printed his *Romances*, wrote to Scott in June of 1804 that:

the success of Ritson's work has not been such as to seduce our booksellers; and so few of them are disposed to encourage the prospect of editing *intire* [*sic*] any future tales of the same sort that Park seems to be perfectly cured of the prospect of editing the 'life of Alexander' (MS 873).

Robert Southey, visiting Edinburgh and Scott in 1805, wrote to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn that 'Were there any sale for such things I would willingly add three more volumes to Ritsons – but these must be left to be done by future Academies – perhaps the London Institution may bestow some of its funds upon our national literature' (*Letters* 20 Oct 1805). He had identified a manuscript containing several romances, and, since he could not edit it himself, he arranged with Scott for the Advocates' Library to purchase it (*Letters* 3 Oct; 20 Oct 1805). Henry Weber's collection of 1810 was explicitly positioned as a continuation of the project begun earlier in the decade, building upon the work of Ritson and Ellis and picking up many of the threads that had been dropped, including *Kyng Alisaunder*. However, it was, as Matthews has argued, 'an ill-fated project from the outset', and met with little support (77).

Although immediate support was not forthcoming, these works, as Curran argues, 'wholly altered the conception of British literature' (128). A selection of medieval romance was integrated, in the words of both Percy and Ellis, into the 'stock of ancient English literature' (*Reliques* III: viii; *Early English Poets* III: 409). When authors and readers discussed and reacted to medieval romance in the early nineteenth century, it was these works that they responded to, directly or indirectly,



unless they were within in the small circle who were able and willing to consult the manuscripts themselves. The first portion of this chapter will provide a description of the structure of Ritson's collection, its relationship with the earlier scholarship, and a few comparisons to the work of Ellis. The second will explore the circumstances which made these works, briefly, possible. Combined with other contemporary correspondence, the letters from Ellis to Scott, now held by the National Library of Scotland, provide an invaluable record the production of these works. These letters have been studied. Lockhart includes several extracts from both halves of the correspondence in his *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*. He presents Scott's interest in medieval romance at the turn of the century through his correspondence and friendships with other literary antiquaries, the different aspects of which are represented by the juxtaposition of the 'narrow-minded, sour, and dogmatical little word-catcher' Ritson and 'amiable and elegant George Ellis' (I: 261). Extracts from Ellis's letters to Scott were included in the 1832 edition of Scott's letters, although Grierson was obliged to rely primarily upon Lockhart for Scott's letters to Ellis. Bronson has identified all the direct references to Ritson in these letters, and the relevant extracts can be found in his biography. However, the bulk of these letters have not been closely examined, as they deal with the minutiae of Ellis's preparation of the *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* and Scott's preparation of *Sir Tristrem*. As Lockhart explained, this 'minute antiquarian discussion...could hardly interest the general reader' (262). While this is certainly the case for a general reader, for a reader interested in the publication of medieval romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century they are fascinating, particularly as they provide enough information to construct a detailed timeline of the work of Scott, Ellis, Ritson, Leyden, Heber and Park. This reveals several important facts. Park's report to Anderson that Ellis had set aside materials he had gathered late in 1801 to allow Ritson to publish his collection is a serious overstatement, one which masks a more interesting dynamic. As information and transcripts flowed between London and Edinburgh, Ellis's plans changed considerably between March of 1801, when his correspondence with Scott began, and June of 1804, when he wrote to Scott that he had delivered his *Romances* to the printers. These letters, and others, reveal that an extraordinary amount of work occurred within a very small window, dependent upon

a small, diverse network of men who understood themselves to be engaged in a collaborative project.

**‘Mr. Ritson will highly gratify the lovers of such reading by their publication, and of such inquirers by his notes’**

Published near the end of 1802, shortly before his death, *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* was one of Joseph Ritson’s final works. In *The Impetus of Amateur Scholarship*, Monica Santini distinguishes between ‘the late eighteenth century, which is characterised by theoretical disquisitions about the origins of romantic fiction’ and the scholarship of the early nineteenth century, ‘dominated by collections of romances and other early material’ (10). Ritson’s collection self-consciously straddles these two modes of scholarship, the opening dissertation describing and refuting the eighteenth-century theoretical debates, while the editing of the poems and the extensive notes demonstrate a complex and productive engagement with individual texts, although the quotable and provocative passages of the dissertation often overshadow the significance of the collection itself. In these three volumes, twelve very different poems were made accessible for the first time in centuries. Their language is often difficult, and some of them are violent and shocking. Many passages are beautiful.

Several reviews of Ritson’s *Romanceës* appeared in the years following its publication: in the *Critical Review* of October 1803, in the *Annual Review* for 1803, and the *British Critic* in September 1804, and Scott’s review in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1806. These reviews demonstrate a range of reactions to Ritson’s work and to the news of Ritson’s death on the twenty-third of September, 1803. In *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh: 1788-1802*, Derek Roper defends the Reviews of the period against accusations of excessive commercial bias, hack-writing and ‘puffing’, arguing that ‘though our picture of these Reviews is incomplete the evidence we have strongly suggests that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century they were as ably staffed and as honestly edited as those of any later period’ (36). This approach allows Roper to seriously engage with the literary criticism found in the Reviews, finding many perceptive and useful responses to the major works of the period. Roper notes that ‘commercial factors were probably less of a threat to fair

reviewing than personal relationships': within a small literary world, a reviewer was likely to be a friend or an enemy (32). However, Roper argues that 'a personal interest in the work under review does not always give rise to bad criticism' as the most qualified reviewers would often be the least disinterested (33). As the reviews of Ritson's work demonstrate, these features were exaggerated in the very small world of those interested in the recovery of early English writing. Where an author has been identified – Scott for the *Edinburgh Review*, Robert Southey for the *Annual Review* – they are both authors with their own stake in the publication of early English literature, and use their reviews of Ritson's collection to intervene in the field in which they worked.

The briefest and most dismissive of the reviews was published in the *Critical Review* in October 1803. It identifies the key challenge faced by Ritson: the difficulty of finding an audience for medieval poetry. Like Ritson's collection, it opens with Percy's arguments for the study of medieval romance. However, this reviewer is not convinced. Romances might instruct and entertain, yet 'in this branch of reading, we meet with objects which disgust, with adventures at variance with probability, with language not refined by art, nor polished by correction' (179). The poetry of 'these rude times' contains violations of both morality and manners, and 'if purity of taste be thus disgusted, if a blush thus stain the cheek of virtue, and religion and morality be equally undermined, there will remain but a trifling acquisition to put on the opposite scale' (180). The reviewer calls into question the value of undertaking this project in any form, demonstrating that interest in medieval romance remained, despite the work of the eighteenth-century scholars, a potentially disreputable hobby, one which reflected poorly on the taste of those inclined to undertake it. Moreover, the reviewer implies, such a work will inevitably have a limited readership, confined to those who are willing to wade through the material, 'the select few to whom alone such studies are pleasing' (180).

As Matthews has argued, unless comfortable enough to forego profit altogether, an individual publishing a work on early English texts would have to rely on either patronage or sales. Ritson's collection, and other works like it, were expensive products. Ritson's three octavo volumes sold for 11. 7s., as did Ellis's three volumes (prices taken from the *Annual Review*). Ritson's collection was a

handsomely printed work, and the careful printing and high price served to distinguish the scholarly editions of early English poetry from the chapbooks in which later redactions of similar texts survived, although this was not always appreciated. The potential audience was always small, and the possibility of profit remote.

Moreover, the *Critical Review* draws a crucial distinction between the controversial opening dissertation and the poetry of Ritson's collection. The latter are dismissed entirely, of interest only to those 'select few'. The titles are listed, followed by the observation that:

Mr. Ritson will highly gratify the lovers of such reading by their publication, and of such inquirers by his notes. We might offer some remarks on each poem, as well as the notes themselves: but the subject is not generally interesting; and the whole are liable to common and repeatedly urged objections. (186)

However, the dissertation is of interest to the reviewer, who offers long extracts from the most controversial passages. Although no one with appropriate taste will be interested in reading medieval romances, they might be interested in the scholarly debates about the origins of romance, the development of the English language, the existence of Percy's manuscript, the status of minstrels, and the propriety of reproducing medieval oaths. Ritson's paratexts contain passages offensive enough to condemn, but not so offensive that they cannot be quoted. Ritson's aggressive rhetoric gained him notoriety, resulting in a long review for a work on a subject 'not generally interesting'. The reviewer calls attention to the status of many of these debates as ongoing controversies, not necessarily accessible to those not already involved.

Characteristically, Ritson's most explicit explanation of his editorial philosophy is made in an attack on Percy. Ritson repeats Percy's description of the state of his manuscript, and observes that

the labour of the right reverend editour in correcting, refining, improveing, comleteing, and enlargeing, the orthography, grammar, text, stile, and supplying the chasms and hiatuses, *valdè deflenda!* must have equal'd that of Hercules in cleanseing the Augean stable:

so that a parcel of old rags and tatters were thus ingeniously and happily converted into an elegant new suit' (cvii-cix).

The manuscript certainly exists, Ritson concedes, but the published poetry bears a distant and uncertain relationship to the ostensible source. Ritson does not entirely reject editorial intervention, but insists that it must be transparent:

To correct the obvious errors of an illiterate transcribeer, to supply irremediable defects, and to make sense of nonsense, are certainly essential duties of an editor of ancient poetry; provided he act with integrity and publicity; but secretly to suppress the original text, and insert his own fabrications for the sake of providing more refined entertainment for readers of taste and genius, is no proof of either judgement, candour, or integrity. (cix)

Ritson argues that the practice of an editor is an expression of their character, a reflection on their 'integrity'. Ritson follows this attack with a demonstration of 'in what manner this ingenious editor conducted himself in this patch'd up publication' (cix). He prints two versions of 'The Marriage of Sir Gawaine' found in Percy's *Reliques*: the 'improvement' taken from the edition of 1775, and the original printed in the edition of 1795. The two versions are printed on facing pages, and each page bears a running title of either 'The Original', or 'The Improvement' providing a devastatingly elegant demonstration of Percy's intervention. At first, the differences are minor, some changes to the spelling of proper names, words added to improve the metre: then the reader turns the page, to find an entirely blank page under the heading 'The Original' facing a full page of additions entirely composed by Percy. Other sections show stanzas with no line unaltered, or stanzas entirely omitted.

Ritson concludes:

This mode of publishing ancient poetry displays, it must be confessed, considerable talent and genius, but favours strongly, at the same time, of unfairness and dishonesty....The purchasers and perusers of such a collection are deceived and imposed upon; the pleasure they receive is derived from the idea of antiquity, which, in fact, is perfect illusion. If the ingenious editor had published all his imperfect poems by correcting the blunders of puerility or inattention, and supplying

the defects of barbarian ignorance, with the proper distinction of type (as, in one instance, he actually has done), it would not onely have gratify'd the austereſt antiquary, but also provide'd refine'd entertainment "for every reader of taste and genius." He would have acted fairly and honourably, and given every sort of reader complete satisfaction. Authenticity would have been unite'd with improvement, and all would have gone wel; whereas, in the present editions, it is firmly believe'd, not one article has been ingenuously or faithfully printed from the begining to the end (cxli-cxlii)

Ritson acknowledges the commonplace distinction between the 'reader of taste and genius' and the more austere antiquary, yet argues that the needs of 'every sort or reader' can be met. He stresses the commercial nature of the published book: the 'purchaseers' of a text advertised as authentically ancient have been defrauded by a sophisticated product, regardless of the greater aesthetic value. Although there is an obvious continuity with the analogous passage in the *English Songs*, Ritson's rhetoric has intensified in the intervening decades.

Ritson's edition of his texts is extremely conservative, although he abandons the near facsimile of the *Ancient Songs*. For each poem, he bases his text on a single source. Ritson makes some concessions to modern orthography, expanding abbreviations and replacing obsolete characters, although not otherwise modernizing the spelling. In some cases Ritson uses the notes in the final volume to describe the palaeography, particularly the different forms of thorn, with longer or shorter ascenders, as evidence for his proposed dates. Ritson balances the convenience of the audience with the necessity of documenting the material features of the manuscript. Sometimes this is done grudgingly. In the notes for *The Geste of Kyng Horn* he notes that 'the use of the z might have been retain'd, after the example of respectable editours; but, with the Saxon characters, is sacrifice'd to the publick taste or prejudice' (264). These decisions reflect the overlapping and competing purposes of the texts: while a more general audience would likely view the medieval orthography as an irrelevant impediment, it functions as supporting evidence in Ritson's assignation of likely dates to the poems, upon which larger historical debates hinge. Within the notes, Ritson draws extensively on comparisons between the version he

has selected for his edition and the others he has identified, although in different ways for each poem.

Ritson's approach can be, and was, compared to that of Ellis. Ellis's prose abstracts present a highly mediated form of the romances. They are aimed at a reader who is interested in their contents but is disinclined to deal with the unfamiliar language. This approach extends to Ellis's description of secondary texts in his introduction. For example, he observes that many arguments over the history of romance draw upon the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but these are often inaccessible, both literally and figuratively, and so Ellis provides brief prose abstracts of both works (I: 46-47). Ellis's prose sometimes highlights the ridiculous aspects of the romances, particularly what appear to be preposterous or illogical motivations.

As the *Critical Review* suggests, Ritson's 'Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy' might have appealed to an audience already invested in the controversies discussed. Ritson's dissertation is divided into four sections: 1. Origin of Romance, 2. Saxon and English Language, 3. Romancees, and 4. Minstrels and Minstrelsy. In this selection of subjects, Ritson revisits the major debates of the eighteenth-century, and of his conflicts with Warton and Percy. Organized around the debates of the eighteenth century, the dissertation quickly became dated: it functions less as a work on medieval romance than as a work on the eighteenth-century understanding of medieval romance.

Ritson's approach in the dissertation is largely destructive and reactive, summarizing the positions of others and explaining their many failings. This is particularly noticeable in his discussion of the origin of romance: 'Different authours have attributeed the origin of romance, to three sourcees, altogether remote from each other: 1. The Arabians; 2. The Scandinavians; 3. The Provençals' and Ritson considers and rejects each of these in turn (xix). However, Ritson does not merely reject their conclusions, but uses his examination of their arguments to make a larger point about the appropriate methodology for historical claims. The bulk of his response to Warton's Arabian theories consists of assertions that Warton's claims are unfounded, that no texts exist which could support his contentions, expanding upon the arguments that he had made two decades earlier in the *Observations*. To dismiss Warton's theories about the importance of American bards, Ritson lists the three

vernacular Breton texts known to him, none earlier than the fifteenth century (xxiv). Similarly, he lists the Welsh texts he knows to exist, to demonstrate that none are known from the crucial early period (xxvi). Ritson challenges the logic of Percy's arguments for a Scandinavian origin, arguing that the late preservation of pre-Christian culture, on which Percy's claim relies, 'is a fact to be prove'd, not by affirmative assertions, but by the production of ancient manuscripts, or the testimony of contemporaneous [*sic*] or veracious historians' (xxvii). Ritson's dissertation effectively becomes a summary of the competing eighteenth-century theories of romance, and a catalogue of the medieval vernacular texts known to exist at the turn of the century.

In his 1806 review, Scott identifies Ritson's faults as 'the acrimonious spirit of vindictive controversy' and his undiscerning 'accumulation of material' (392). Both are portrayed as the characteristic faults of antiquaries, who are warned that 'the ridicule which their pursuits are at all times apt to incur, becomes pointed in proportion to the indecent vehemence of their argument' (393). Scott uses his review to raise more general concerns with antiquarian practice and its place in society, in which the useful and important features of the research are undermined by a tendency towards the ridiculous, a topic to which he would return with Jonathan Oldbuck. Ritson's 'accumulation of material' results in an unwieldy and dry text, yet it is also an unavoidable result of the structure of his argument.

While his predecessors had worked to find the earliest possible origins, often giving texts the earliest possible date, or confidently assuming the existence of earlier texts, Ritson repeatedly demolishes claims for early texts, frustrating the search for ancient origins. The quest for ancient origins is often ridiculous, as when Percy considers the probability of a British origin for American Arthurian romance: 'the Amoricans, who are not known, on any ancient or respectable authority, to have ever possess'd a single story on this subject, however confidently the fact may be asserted, or plausibly presume'd, it is ridiculous to account for their mode of getting what it cannot be prove'd they ever had' (xlvi). Ritson's scepticism is sometimes excessive, as when he doubts the existence of the prose Edda, noting that Snorri is 'no bad name for a dreamer', yet his observation that 'the *Edda* itself, if not a rank forgery, is at least a comparatively modern book, of the thirteenth or fourteenth



century, manifestly compile'd long after Christianity was introduce'd into the north' is a useful corrective (xxx). Ritson does not offer a competing ancient origin for romance – he simply dismisses those of others. Scott concludes that:

No positive opinion is given, in the Essay, upon the origin of romance, although the theories of former writers are combated with apparent success from an intimate acquaintance with authorities of the middle ages. Indeed, we have been long of opinion, that Mr Ritson was, both by talent and disposition, better qualified to assail the opinions of others, than to deduce from the facts which he produces a separate theory of his own (393).

However, I would argue that the destructive tendency of Ritson's writings ultimately allows him to reject the frameworks through which romance had been approached during the eighteenth century. He does not provide his own answer because the question itself has been rendered irrelevant. As Johnston has demonstrated, eighteenth-century scholarship sought the origin of romance:

Most contemporaries of Addison felt, with him, that 'romantic' literature possessed a quality, or perhaps simply a type of subject matter, that was easily identifiable. It seemed to them that one sort of 'modern' literature was full of the fancifulness that delighted in dragons and enchanters. Classical literature on the other hand appeared to be comparatively free from such things. Whence, then, had this material come? Attempts to explain the origin of romantic fabling, and trace its progress began in the late seventeenth century. (13-14)

The debates over the origin of romance rely on an understanding of romance as something foreign, which must come from somewhere. Ritson begins his dissertation by mocking classical mythology and its inclusion in epic poetry, arguing that 'Homer, in fact, is much more extravagant and hyperbolical, or sublime, if it must be so, than Ariosto himself, the very prince of romance' (viii). Ritson rhetorically destabilizes categories, as when he recasts Herodotus as a 'profess'd antiquary', or describes Homer as a minstrel (x). Ritson concludes that 'It appears, however, difficult to demonstrate that the comparatively modern romancees of the French owe

their immediate origin to the epick poetry, or fabulous tales, of the Greeks or Romans, but it may be fairly admitted, as by no means improbable, that these remains of ancient literature had some degree of influence; though the connection is too remote and obscure to admit of elucidation' (xii). Ritson attacks the conventional wisdom that provides a clear distinction between classical works and romance, and yet avoids making a clear connection between them. He suggests nebulous probabilities, while emphasizing the limits of the evidence.

In addition to challenging the distinction between classical mythology and romance, Ritson challenges the distinction between Christian religion and superstition: 'The gods of the ancient heathens, and the saints of the more modern christians, are the same sort of imaginary beings; who, alternately, give existence to romanceës, and receive it from them' (xxxii). Ritson provides perceptive readings of the relationships between the genres of romance and hagiography – 'If the hero of a romance be, occasionally, borrow'd from heaven, he is, as often sent thither in return' – observing the ways in which secular heroes are often presented as champions of Christianity (xxxiii). This is combined with deliberately provocative abuse – 'There is this distinction, indeed, between the heathen deities, and the christian saints, that the fables of the former were indebted for their existence to the flowery imagination of the sublime poet, and the legends of the latter to the gloomy fanaticism of a lazy monk or stinking priest' (xxxiii). Ritson takes Warton's association of romance with the crusades and provides a more cynical interpretation: rather than the result of contact with a fantastic East, romances are the native result of bigoted propaganda (xxxiii-xxxiv). If there is no clear division between romance and classical mythology, or between romance and Christian religion, then it is not clear what is sought in the quest for the origin of romance. Ritson argues that 'after all, it seems highly probable that the origin of romance, in every age or country, is to be sought in the different systems of superstition which have, from time to time, prevail'd, whether pagan or christian' (xxxii). Unlike his predecessors, Ritson does not attempt to find an ancient origin for 'romance' as an abstraction – he remains closely focused on specific texts.

The first section of Ritson's dissertation – 'Origin of Romance' – was largely destructive. The third section – 'Romanceës' – begins to establish a new approach.

‘Romance’ is no longer approached as an fantastic type of writing and thinking that needs to be explained, leaving space for the ‘romanceës’ to be considered as a collection of a particular type of text, very broadly understood as fictional narratives that share a number of conventional themes, styles, and plots. Those known to exist can be listed, and connections drawn between them. Provisional theories can be advanced about those which might once have existed, but have been lost – and might still be found. Grounded in existing texts, Ritson’s narrative begins much later than any of those which he has rejected. He finds no romances among the Britons, claiming that the ‘present Welsh are unable to produce the slightest literary vestige’ of any ‘fabulous adventures, or tales, in verse’ before the thirteenth century. The only Saxon romance he can identify is the prose translation of Apollonius of Tyre (lxii, lxxxii). Ritson’s style remains argumentative, and he loses no opportunity to point out where his carefully supported account differs from that of others. No romance ‘in Engleish rime, has been hitherto discover’d or mention’d to exist, before the reign of Edward the first, toward the end of which, as we may fairly conjecture, that of *Horn child*, a very concise and licentious translation, or imitation, and abridgement, rather, of the French original’ (lxxxvii). This poem is included in the collection, and the notes in the third volume expand upon this point, identifying different versions, contesting Percy’s attempt to assign it to an earlier period and defending the use of the title ‘Geste of Kyng Horn’ (used in the opening lines of the manuscript) rather than the conventional ‘Horn Child’ (used by Chaucer) (266-269). Many of the responses to Ritson’s collection contain some contribution to this debate. The question of the origin of romance is transformed into disputes about the precise dates and relationships between identifiable texts, in which specific details are employed as evidence in often technical arguments.

Ritson discusses a wide range of romances, including even those which are mentioned in other works but have not been found. For nearly all of them, he identifies French sources. Only after he has listed concrete examples of existing romances does he offer a conclusion:

That the Engleish acquire’d the art of romance-writeing from the French seems clear and certain, as most of the specimens of that art, in the former language, are palpable and manifest translations of those in

the other, and this, too, may serve to account for the origin of romance in Italy, Spain, Germany, and Scandinavia: but the French romanceës are too ancient to be indebted for their existence to more barbarous nations. It is, therefor, a vain and futile endeavour to seek for the origin of romance: in all ageës and countrys, where literature has been cultivated, and genius and taste have inspire'd, whether in India, Persia, Greece, Italy, or France, the earliest product of that cultivation, and that genius and taste, has been poetry and romance, with reciprocal obligations, perhaps, between one country and another. The Arabians, the Persians, the Turks, and, in short, almost every nation in the globe, abound in romanceës of their own invention. (c-ci)

As with song, romance is both universal and nationally specific. Ritson's insistence on rigorous evidence, on specific texts rather than overarching narrative, allows him to reject the fundamental question of the eighteenth-century study of romance. His dissertation remains firmly grounded in the debates of the eighteenth century. The second section covers the politically charged question of the cultural, institutional and linguistic continuity between the ancient British, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman periods, and the fourth is spent once again addressing the status of minstrels. However, it also points towards a new approach, which rejects the search for ancient origins in favour of the more achievable goal of a close study of existing texts and the relationships between them. This approach finds its expression in the texts of the collection, and the copious notes attached to the third volume.

Ellis's approach in his *Selections of Early English Metrical Romances* again provides many comparisons, and similarities. Like Ritson, Ellis begins with a summary of the competing theories of the origin of romance. Ellis's title-page promises *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances, Chiefly Written During the Early Part of the Fourteenth Century; to Which is Prefixed An Historical Introduction, Intended to Illustrate the Rise and Progress of Romantic Composition in France and England*. Like Ritson, he focuses on existing texts, resulting in a selection that is mostly confined to the early fourteenth century and emphasizes the relationship between French and English texts. Like Ritson, Ellis provides an introduction addressing the major theories of romance in turn. He provides a short,

complimentary summary of Percy's Scandinavian theories (28). His challenges are made gently: 'The only rational objection, perhaps, which can be adduced against this system is, that it is too exclusive' (29). Ellis shifts the necessity of critiquing Warton's Arabian theories onto Percy, noting that 'It is unnecessary to examine much at length the merits of a theory, of which the substance has been ably refuting by Bishop Percy in the later editions of his essay' (31). However, rather than rejecting Warton altogether, Ellis salvages the useful elements of his theories:

Yet although Mr. Warton has carried to an extravagant length the supposed influence of Arabian invention, and though he is often misled by fanciful analogies, we must not infer, with a modern critic [Ritson], that his opinions are totally unfounded. (31-32)

Ellis argues for a more general understanding of contact with Arabic thinking, citing the adoption of numerals, astronomy and medicine. He next considers Leyden's arguments for Britany, which have 'the advantage of being free from the objections which have been made to the preceding theories' (33). He concludes that:

The reader will perceive that the preceding systems are by no means incompatible, and that there is no absurdity in supposing that the scenes and characters of our romantic histories are very generally, though not exclusively, derived from the Bretons, or from the Welsh of this island; that much of the colouring, and perhaps some particular adventures, may be of Scandinavian origin; and that occasional episodes, together with part of the machinery, may have been borrowed from the Arabians. In fact, there is reason to believe that critics, in their survey of Gothic literature, as well as of Gothic architecture, have too hastily had recourse to a single hypothesis, for the purpose of explaining the probable origin of forms and proportions which appeared unusual, and of ornaments which were thought to arise from a wild and capricious fancy (36)

Ritson had argued that everyone was wrong; Ellis found a way for everyone to be right. Both writers felt the need to address the debate before they could move forward. Ellis manages to sidestep the question of the origin of romance, defining it so generally that its origins are everywhere and nowhere, allowing him, like Ritson,

to focus on the narrower question of the relationships between existing texts. Ellis closes his introduction with the self-deprecatory observation that:

It is now time to close this long and desultory, and perhaps very tedious introduction. Many readers of the following old-wives'-tales will, probably, be little solicitous to know whether the Danes, the Arabians, or the Britons, supplied the original materials of such compositions. But the inquiry having given rise to much controversy amongst men of great learning and genius, it did not altogether depend upon the present writer to dismiss it with a very slight notice. It seemed to him, that the best way of avoiding all appearances of competition with his abler predecessors was, to lay before his readers his whole stock of materials; and this, he hopes, will be accepted as his excuse for the motley character of the preceding pages. (125-126)

Ritson took it upon himself to challenge his predecessors; Ellis carefully avoids the appearance of doing so, once again presenting himself as merely making difficult material available to readers.

The arguments that Ritson makes in his dissertation are of little interest to students of medieval romance today. More texts have been discovered, and subsequent developments in the fields of philology, orthography, palaeography and dialectology have provided a firmer ground for identifying the provenance of and relationships between particular texts. However, Ritson's conclusions have been superseded because his theoretical approach has been largely accepted.

### **'Dignified Sensibility and Friendly Exertion'**

In her work on eighteenth-century antiquaries, Rosemary Sweet describes the ways in which British antiquaries saw themselves as part of 'a Republic of Letters'. Although the phrase 'Republic of Letters' is most commonly used in an early modern context to describe an international community of scholars, Sweet highlights the relationships within Britain which bridged distinctions of class, religion, and politics (61). The publication of medieval romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century relied upon a network of men who saw themselves as engaged in a collaborative project and exchanged assistance, information, and gossip.

This was the context which led to Park's letter to Anderson. Ritson, despite his atheism, politics, and abrasive personality, was a member of this network, providing and receiving assistance. In London, he worked closely with Douce and Park on several projects (Bronson 245-248). Ritson visited Scott and Leyden at Lasswade Cottage in the fall of 1801, briefly staying with Anderson in Edinburgh, and the letters between the other men carry various accounts of this visit. In October, Park reports to Anderson that he has learned from Ellis (who had received a letter from Scott) that Ritson had reached Edinburgh, and asks that Anderson pass on a request for transcripts to Ritson, 'as he is always in the habit of research among the pot-hooks of antiquarianism' (Bronson 250). During this visit, Ritson expressed his 'ill-humour and groundless jealousy' towards Ellis to Anderson, who conveyed his remarks to Park, leading to Park's exasperated letter. Earlier in the same letter, Park reports:

Ritson dropped in a few evenings since, & expressed more pleasure, more equable pleasure, than I remember at any time to have heard him express before, with the hospitality & kindness he experienced at Edinb. He was delighted with Dr Anderson, while the wonderful acquirements of Mr Leyden and Mr Scott enforced high commendation. In short, the Scotch as a nation, were men of genius, & whoever would wish to be hospitably received in a land of strangers, must visit Scotland. (Bronson 253; 22.4.10 213v)

Park's letters provide a small glimpse of the social practice of literary antiquarian research. The men involved visit each other, share their plans (and gossip), and provide assistance. Many of Park's letters to Anderson, including this one, were addressed by Ellis to take advantage of his franking privileges as a member of parliament.

As Sweet observed, antiquarian research 'was not class neutral, but it did provide a language within which people from very different backgrounds could communicate and exchange information', and such disparities could 'open up opportunities by which an individual could hope to improve his prospects by forging contacts with those of a higher social status' (60). Park had been trained as an engraver, turning to literature in his twenties, corresponding with William Cowper

and Anna Seward, before turning again to an editorial career (Courtney). Anderson's work as the editor of the fourteen volume collection of *The Works of The British Poets* (1792-1807) has been thoroughly studied by Thomas Bonnell, in his work on the role of similar multi-volume collections in the formation of the literary canon. Anderson had been a physician until his marriage gave him the financial freedom 'to pursue literary interests that bore fruit in editions of James Græme, Robert Blair, Tobias Smollett, and James Grainger' (199). As the editor of *The Works of the British Poets* he was, Bonnell argues, 'the first non-bookseller to wield much editorial authority over a multi-volume poetry collection' (199). Anderson enlarged the scope of the collection considerably, pushing for the inclusion of more and earlier authors. However, the publishers (James Mundell and Son) were sceptical of readers' interest in early literature, and pushed back: despite early plans to include Langland, Gower, and Lydgate, Chaucer was the only medieval poet included (213). This was still the dull and moralizing understanding of the middle ages, enlivened by Chaucer, which had been decried by Percy and Ritson. Despite the publisher's reservations, it was the early volumes that proved most influential: Anderson's collection introduced Wordsworth to Chaucer, Drayton, and the other Elizabethans, causing the poet to express his gratitude to Anderson personally; Coleridge recommended the first four volumes to his son; Southey described Anderson as 'instrumental' in changing poetic tastes (201, 226). Park's letters to Anderson contain frequent discussions of the practical work of identifying potential publishers, and evaluations of the relative risk and potential monetary gain of different projects, and attempts to gain introductions to Anderson's connections (principally Percy). Park himself would edit a collection of British poets, *The Works of the British Poets, Collected by Thomas Park, F.S.A* (1805-1812). As Bonnell demonstrates, the advertisements for this edition promised that the text was 'collated with the best editions' and Park was praised as someone who could be counted upon for a careful collation and an accurate publication (273, 279). Despite the often dismissive reviews of Ritson, a niche did exist for an editor who cultivated a reputation for accuracy. Park, more deliberate and more diplomatic than Ritson, was able to establish himself as a professional scholar and editor of English literature, although his financial situation was always precarious.



The surviving correspondence between Scott and Ellis begins with a letter from Scott dated March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1801, evidently responding to an earlier letter from Ellis, in which he had requested information. In these earlier years, the letters are friendly and informal, but almost entirely confined to their work on medieval romance, with occasional brief references to the deaths of family members. Mutual acquaintances are discussed, almost exclusively those involved in the same project: John Leyden, Richard Heber, Thomas Park, Francis Douce, and Joseph Ritson. Scott immediately places Ellis within a collaborative network:

Your eminence in the literary world, and the warm praises of our mutual friend Heber, had made me long for an opportunity of being known to you. I enclose the first sheet of *Sir Tristrem*, that you may not so much rely upon my opinion as upon that which a specimen of the style and versification may enable your better judgement to form for itself....These pages are transcribed by Leyden, an excellent young man, of uncommon talents, patronised by Heber, and who is of the utmost assistance to my literary undertakings (I: 111, ellipses in Grierson).

Leyden's letters to Heber reveal that information about the work of Scott and Ellis had been passing between London and Edinburgh before the two men were introduced, as Heber provided news about Ellis and Ritson, to be passed on to Scott, while Leyden provided him with a detailed account of the early study of the Auchinleck to be compared with the information gathered by Ellis and Ritson (MS 938 3, 11-12). Ellis replies to Scott in a letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> April. He claims the rights of a long friendship based on their mutual interests, 'I consider myself a friend of 530 years standing, more or less', and offers a detailed response to the transcript of *Sir Tristrem* which Scott had sent to him, drawing on an evident familiarity with the conventions of medieval romance and an interest in etymology. In the portions of the earlier letter from Scott which have not survived, he evidently offered transcripts of texts found in the Auchinleck manuscript, to which Ellis replies that 'My project to which you so kindly offer to contribute your valuable assistance' is still in its infancy, but proposes an ambitious project:

I contemplate it with pleasure, & shall prosecute it with much more, if I find that besides your edition of Sir Tristram, (which I have announced) you can find among your booksellers such a stock of public spirit as shall induce them to undertake the publication of the whole volume, or at least of all the metrical Romances in the volume from which you have transcribed the knight of Leonois. With respect to the said knight, I hope you mean to edit him with a good long preliminary essay, as well as with a glossary, that you will number the lines of the stanzas, & attend to the punctuation, particularly for the purpose of distinguishing the speeches of the actors; because modern readers want all these helps. They will also be much obliged to you for a division into chapters (if that be possible) with proper heads explanatory of their contents, or else a regular analysis of the whole, with a reference to the lines or pages, prefixed to the text. If you could, in the meantime make out for me, without much trouble to yourself, a sketch of the story, I shall be much obliged to you, because I will then compare it with the adventures in the French metrical fragment, & communicate to you the particulars in which they differ, and transcripts of such parts as you want. The french authors allusions to Tomas must, of course, be inserted in your prefatorial essay, and you will perhaps like to have the account of Tristram's death which is exquisitely told, & which, being wanting in your original, you would do well to translate metrically (not à la Chatterton, of course, but with an avowal that it is a translation) so as to complete the story. (1v)

In this early letter, Ellis immediately establishes a relationship which would profoundly influence both their works. He briefly proposes the possibility of editing the romances in the Auchinleck manuscript, with the necessary and perceptive caveat that booksellers may be reluctant. He offers his own advice about the necessary editorial apparatus to an edition of an early text, reflecting the necessity of making a text accessible and convenient to readers. Scott did provide everything suggested by Ellis, although it cannot be established how much can be attributed to direct influence and how much to their similar principles. Scott and Ellis both favoured a

greater degree of intervention than Ritson, who did not add quotation marks to distinguish the speech of the characters. Ellis responds to Scott's offer of assistance with the offer of transcripts from the 'the French metrical fragment', then in the possession of Francis Douce. Later in the same letter he relays to Scott that 'Heber, & Douce (whom you must be acquainted with hereafter) and myself, are delighted at your project about the Sagas' (2v). From this point forward, transcripts began to flow between London and Edinburgh, as well as advice and gossip. In the same letter, Ellis offers his advice on the obscene portions of *Sir Tristrem*, as discussed earlier, describing how Leyden had written to Heber, who had posed the question to Ellis, who repeated it to Douce, who replied to Ellis, who wrote to Scott, participating in an ongoing conversation over hundreds of miles.

Leyden appears frequently in the letters between Ellis and Scott. In 1793, when Leyden was a student at the University of Edinburgh, he was introduced to Anderson, and for many years Leyden was a frequent guest of Anderson, who published many of his early poems, in his role as the editor of the *Edinburgh Magazine* (Brown 64-65). Anderson introduced Leyden to Heber in 1799 (although Constable would later claim to have done so, to Leyden's annoyance), and Heber introduced him to Scott, whom he assisted with the *Border Minstrelsy* and his work on medieval romance (197, 199). However, for financial reasons, he began to consider travelling to Africa, and the attempts by Scott, Heber, and Ellis to exert influence to secure a post for Leyden, eventually leading to his journey to India, provide a running undercurrent to the letters of this period. Scott wrote to Ellis early in December to report that:

I am truly anxious about Leyden's Indian journey, which seems to hang fire. Mr. William Dundas was so good as to promise me his interest to get him appointed secretary to the Institution; but whether he has succeeded or not, I have not yet learned. The various kinds of distress under which literary men, I mean such as have no other profession than letters, must labour, in a commercial country, is a great disgrace to society. I own it you I always tremble for the fate of genius when left, to its own exertions, which, however powerful, are

usually, by some bizarre dispensation of nature, useful to every one but themselves. (I: 124)

Ellis and Scott continued to exchange news and worries, Ellis repeatedly assuring Scott that he was doing all he could in London, until Leyden was able to visit Ellis and his wife on his way to Portsmouth before embarking (when he also visited Ritson). However, during the brief period between his introduction to Scott and his departure for India Leyden played a key role in the study of early English and Scottish literature, through his assistance with the *Minstrelsy*, his own edition of the *Complaint of Scotland* (1801), and his participation in the work on medieval romance.

The letters between Scott and Ellis reveal that Richard Heber played a vital role in the early study and publication of medieval romance, although he never produced any works himself on the subject. Heber is perhaps best known as a book collector and a founding member of the Roxburghe Club in 1812. In the early years of the nineteenth century, he was a relatively young man, with a quarterly allowance of £100, quarrelling with his father over his purchases at book auctions (Hunt 85-87). After his father's death in 1804 he inherited considerable estates, which he used to amass his legendary collection (87). Arnold Hunt argues that while Heber was never 'a scholar-collector in the sense of someone who collected books of use in his own scholarly projects' his collecting always served a social function, as 'he sought out the company of scholars and put his books at their disposal' (107-8). In addition to making his collections available to others, Heber provided invaluable practical support for the study and publication of medieval romance.

Heber frequently provided introductions, carried messages, attended auctions, and arranged subscriptions. He often assisted his friends by carrying or arranging for the transport of books between London and Edinburgh. The work of Ellis and Scott was deeply influenced by their willingness to exchange materials, but the practical business of transporting books and papers between Edinburgh and London, or later between Lasswade and Ellis's home in Sunninghill, outside Ascot, could be troublesome. Once *The Specimens of the Early English Poets* had been published, Ellis promised copies for Scott and Leyden, reporting that 'Heber promises to send you my grand opus by a smack! ... I will deliver your copy and Leyden's into his

hands in a few days' (5v). Scott wrote to Ellis in May that 'I am in utter despair about some of the hunting terms in *Sir Tristrem*. There is no copy of Lady Juliana Berners' work in Scotland, and I would move heaven and earth to get a sight of it' (I: 115). This is the fifteenth-century text often known as *The Book of Saint Albans* or *The Boke of Seynt Albans* or *The Book of Hawking, Hunting, and Blasing of Arms*, a portion of which is attributed to the prioress Juliana Berners. Luckily, Ellis was in possession of a copy, replying in June: 'If Heber had not been the most heedless of all busy men, he would have not have left town without carrying with him, as he had proposed to do, my edition of the Lady Juliana's book for your inspection' (6r). Fiona Robertson argues that Scott's use of medieval hunting vocabulary, throughout his poetry and novels, as well as the introduction and glossary to *Sir Tristrem*, can be traced to this source (294). While the text was an invaluable and influential resource, actually getting it to Edinburgh proved difficult. The 'dignified sensibility & friendly exertion' described by Park could not prevent a series of frustrating delays. Scott wrote to Ellis that 'I have as yet had only a glance of *The Specimens*. Thomson, to whom Heber intrusted them, had left them to follow him from London in a certain trunk, which has never yet arrived' (I: 116). Ellis began to copy extracts from the *Book of Saint Albans* for Scott, but before he posted the letter Heber returned:

Having been prevented by a series of trifling interruptions from finishing this letter which I began ten days ago, I have just received a note from Heber who is in town, & who being acquainted with the geography of my little library, will be able to find & convey to you Lady Juliana's entire treatise, which will afford a much better answer to your difficulties than this foolish letter. However, as the letter will travel faster than he will & will not be delayed by booksellers' shops on the road, I shall still venture to send you my transcript. (6v)

However, Heber's trip to Edinburgh was delayed, a later letter from Ellis assuring Scott that 'I have this moment had the pleasure of seeing Heber, & have shewn him my Lady Juliana which he promises to convey to you when he visits Scotland, which will be, I believe, next month' (8v). Later in July Scott was still waiting, and Ellis replied to Scott's thanks for the transcripts:

You do me a great deal too much honour be supposing that I must have “discovered and transcribed from Lady Juliana all that was likely to illustrate your subject.” In truth I have only looked over, not read her, and as my volume, though an early & very curious edition, is extremely small & portable, it is very well worth Heber’s trouble to carry it, & you, I trust, will not be sorry to examine it at your leisure. (10r-10v).

By August, Ellis could assure Scott that ‘Lady Juliana, I have already told you, is on her way, in Heber’s portmanteau’ (12r). He was mistaken, and added a postscript to an undated letter from October or November:

I hope I have sent you The Lady Juliana’s precepts on hawking & hunting. Heber’s journey, I known, has miscarried, but a friend of mine (Mr Blackburn) kindly undertook to convey it, and Heber promised, on his part, to send it to him in time. (29r).

The utility of the text to answer Scott’s questions and to provide him with the necessary understanding and vocabulary of hunting and hawking was always considered alongside the material properties of the text, its size, portability, and location.

Heber’s assistance went beyond simple transportation. The revised edition of the *Specimens of the Early English Poets* sold well, for a work on early English literature: ‘Nicol (my publisher) seems to be much pleased with its sale, & looks forward with some confidence to a call for a second edition next year. Such second edition I should wish to render (and Heber promises is shall be) as nearly as possible immaculate’ (11v). A few months later Ellis reported that ‘I am told that about 600 of “Specimens” have been already sold. And that it will be proper to put out a new edition so soon as Heber shall give up the corrected copy in his hands’ (23v). Heber collated the texts quoted by Ellis with those in his own collection and elsewhere, and Hunt argues that Heber’s assistance ‘transform[ed] a textual shambles into something approaching modern standards of accuracy’ (100). Once the *Specimens* had reached Scott, he was able to offer a detailed response to Ellis, including, it seems from Ellis’s response, a number of criticisms (this portion of the letter was not considered interesting by Lockhart and has not survived). Ellis assures him that these will be

addressed in the next edition as he is working ‘to render the specimens less faulty than our friend Heber & I know them to be at present’ (14v). Nicol was also the publisher of Ritson’s collection of *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*, and Ellis reported to Scott in October of 1802 Ritson’s ‘romances, (I beg his pardon Romanceës)’ had not yet been published, as

Nicol has very naturally taken the alarm at the enormous portion of blasphemy which the little unbelieving Antiquary had contrived to insert into his dissertation & notes: the three volumes must therefore submit to a number of cancels as will effectually put an end to any hopes of profit that either editor or publisher may have expected from them; but on this head Ritson is, I am persuaded, very indifferent, though sufficiently alive to vanity. (40r)

By December Ellis could promise Scott that he would soon be able to read Ritson’s collection, giving credit to Heber for making the necessary excisions: ‘His romances will certainly interest you, but they have been so much softened down by Heber, that his representation on the pillory will of course be deferred’ (45r).

Heber’s attempts to assist his friends were not always successful, although his occasional failures reveal important features of the study of early English texts in this period. In February of 1802, Ellis wrote to Scott that Heber’s attempts to convince the Dean of Lincoln Cathedral to lend him the Thornton manuscript for the use of Ellis and Scott had failed. George K. Keiser explores the history of the study and publication of the texts in this manuscript in his article ‘The Nineteenth-Century Discovery of the Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral Library MS. 91)’. Keiser demonstrates that ‘Although a volume of exceptional importance both for its splendid collection of romances, three of them unique versions, and for the richness in the range and variety of the vernacular narrative, devotional, and medical writings it contains, the Thornton Manuscript remained largely unnoticed until the second quarter of the nineteenth century’ (168). Eighteenth-century engagement with the manuscript largely relied upon an antiquarian catalogue, Thomas Tanner’s *Bibliotheca Brittanico-Hibernica* (1748) which included entries for some, but not all of the texts in the manuscript (168). Most importantly for the study of medieval romance, this included an identification of the unique text now usually called the

Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. As Keiser demonstrates, Tanner had been able and willing to travel to Lincoln to examine the manuscript closely, but despite the enthusiasm for medieval romance among antiquarians at the end of the eighteenth century ‘almost none of them – Joseph Ritson, as might be expected, the sole exception – shows any awareness of the reference to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*’ (169-170). Percy was apparently unaware of the manuscript, while Keiser establishes that in the instances when Warton claimed to have consulted the Thornton Manuscript he in fact relied upon Tanner’s catalogue (171). Ritson did not catch these misrepresentations in his *Observations*, though they would not have surprised him. Ritson did consult the manuscript, incorporating references to it in the notes for his *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*, the ‘Catalogue of Romances’, and the *Bibliographia Poetica*, the last demonstrating an awareness of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (172). I have not been able to determine when Ritson was able to visit Lincoln Cathedral, although he may have done so on his way to or from the north of England or Scotland.

Keiser provides a brief account of Heber’s unsuccessful attempt to borrow the manuscript:

The diary of Sir Frederic Madden offers some details of this frustrated attempt. The bibliophile Richard Heber, shortly before his death in 1833, told Madden of having applied in 1803, on behalf of Ellis, for “the loan of the MS. and added, that his application was refused!” (Bodl. Ms. Eng. Hist. c.149, p134). Ellis and Heber would not be the last to meet with frustration in dealing with the authorities at Lincoln cathedral. (173-174)

Madden’s interest in the work of an earlier generation of scholars is significant in itself. To this second-hand account, collected thirty years after the fact, can be added Ellis’s report to Scott in a letter from 11 February, 1802:

Heber has been lately engaged in a negotiation which, both on his account and on ours, I am very sorry to say has completely failed. There is, you know, in the library of Lincoln Cathedral a Romance about Thomas of Ercildoun, and the same volume (I believe) contains the Metrical romance of Percival de Galles which I should have been



very glad to copy & abridge. Now he thought that, by trying his eloquence on the dean, he should be able to elicit, for our use, said volume from said library; but, alas, the Dean is like unto the deaf adder and will not listen to the voice of the charmer. It will therefore be necessary that, for the purpose of saying wise things upon the subject, you should obtain a sight of the MS when you pass through Lincoln, which you will do of course in your way to the South, partly for the purpose of discovering the purpose for which the Devil thought it necessary to look over the town, and partly with a view to avoid the vulgar rectilinear mode of travelling pursued by those who forget that a road constructed for the general object of internal commerce cannot be suited to the objects of enlightened wanderers. As to myself, instead of accepting the Deans permission of carrying Mahomet to survey the mountains, I am quite determined to believe in despite of the Dean & the Devil that the mountains not worth looking at, and that Perceval is either a very dull or a very modern romance.

(48r)

As Ellis had warned in his work of the year before, if texts were not convenient they would not be consulted. Ellis presents a vision of antiquarian research as a hobby, an idiosyncratic sort of tourism, enlightened rather than commercial. Although Ellis mentions the existence of *Percival of Galles* in the *Specimens of the Early English Metrical Romances*, he explains that he was ‘unable to procure a transcript’ (I: 204). *Percival of Galles* is unique to the Thornton Manuscript, and Keiser argues that Ellis must have gained what information he had from Ritson’s *Bibliographia Poetica* (172). However, if Ellis was aware of the text as early as February of 1802, rather than 1803 as in Madden’s account, Ellis likely had an account of it from Ritson before the *Bibliographia Poetica* was published, even if only in the manuscript of that work.

There are several passing references in Ellis’s letters to transcripts acquired from Ritson, as well as to his examinations of Ritson’s publications before they were published. In January of 1802, discussing a transcript requested by Scott, Ellis casually mentions a conversation with Ritson:

I am almost certain that the Poem quoted by Warton has been very carefully transcribed by Ritson, & that I have had it in my possession . . . . Ritson, I think, added, when he put it into my hand, that the writing was also the most difficult that he had ever encountered. Now if all this be so, as I am sure that Ritson sets very little store by his transcript, I could easily write to him to beg the loan of it, & would undertake to send you a perfectly faithful copy of it, and this would be attended with less difficulty, perhaps, than to procure a copy from the Museum, & to request Douce to collate that copy with the original; a precaution absolutely necessary where Ayscough, or indeed any person except Ritson, undertakes to transcribe a very antique MS. (34r)

Despite the ‘splenetic feeling’ Anderson had reported a few months earlier, Ellis is on good enough terms with Ritson to confidently request a favour. Ellis proposes two different routes by which Scott could gain access to manuscripts held in London without leaving Edinburgh, both of which required the coordination and cooperation of multiple parties. The production and exchange of transcripts was both a practical necessity of the publication process and a way in which the antiquarian ‘republic of letters’ was maintained. However, Ellis provides a reminder that the use of transcripts has consequences. Diplomatic skill varied considerably, and to rely on a transcript required trust in its accuracy, or a request for further favours. In an earlier letter, Ellis gave Scott his advice about the retention of the Middle English yogh or the Old English insular g in his edition of *Sir Tristrem*. The gendered aspects of this advice have been considered in an earlier chapter. Ellis reminds Scott that regardless of the judgements that he makes about the nature of his intended audience, there are practical limitations to his choices:

I must first observe that, if your printer will bestow on you a very correct ȝ not at all like a z, and if you will promise, as Godfather for your readers, that they shall not feel very much alarmed at the sight of the said pothook, I am satisfied; although I had difficulty in satisfying several very pretty pairs of eyes that Sir Lanval was capable of being perused at all after the admittance of that obnoxious letter. Your

valuable assistant young Leydan, though, I believe, perfectly correct in his transcript, does not seem to be aware of the difference of two letters which, in most of the old MSS which I have had reason to examine, are, in appearance, very nearly identical.

Obsolete characters could only be retained if they were accurately distinguished in the transmission from medieval to modern manuscript, and then if printers had the type necessary to preserve them. In a recent article, John Frankis explores the persistent problem that yogh has posed for editors of middle English texts, from the seventeenth century to the present day, using the name of the author known as *Layamon*, *Lazamon* or *Lawman* as a case study. As Frankis notes, Ellis influentially used the form ‘Layamon’ to refer to the poet in the *Specimens of the Early English Poets*, but in his text ‘prints an insular g for the manuscript yogh’ (3). This was also what he had done in *Launfal*, using an older form of an obsolete character rather than modernizing the text, exaggerating the distinction between the past and the present. In contrast, Warton ‘when printing texts with the Middle English yogh, regularly uses the modern character that must have seemed to him most similar in appearance, namely <z>’, representing the appearance of the manuscript but not the etymology or pronunciation (3). As Frankis argues, it is difficult to determine how far these choices were guided by Warton and Ellis’s understanding of orthography, etymology and pronunciation, or if they simply resulted from the limitations of available type (4). The seventeenth-century scholar Junius had purchased a font of specially prepared Anglo-Saxon type, and had presented it to Oxford University (4). This could then be used by the early Anglo-Saxonists whose work was published in Oxford, such as Hickes and Wanley, although their practice varied considerably (4-5). However, this resource was not available for works printed in London or Edinburgh. Choices about how to accurately represent medieval manuscripts were not always the product of principled considerations about the nature of the text and its reader, but were often influenced by practical limitations.

While Ritson’s biography has been contested by interested parties since his death, Ellis’s life has received relatively little attention. He appears as a supporting character in the biographies of others: as member of Scott or Canning’s circle, or as a member of an extended family of Jamaican plantation owners. As with Ritson,

Arthur Johnston, Monica Santini and David Matthews have contributed accounts of his work on early English romance, the first being the most complete. The most extensive work on Ellis's biography has been done by Humphrey Gawthrop, who consolidates the various scraps of information from different sources in the process of arguing that Ellis may have provided the inspiration for Emily Brontë's penname.

It is difficult to imagine a background more dissimilar to Ritson's, although their paths briefly and significantly converged. Ellis was born in Jamaica in 1753 (Gawthrop 3). His grandfather, George Ellis, had been Chief Justice of Jamaica; his mother, Susanna Charlotte, was the daughter of Samuel Long, and the sister of Edward Long, author of *The History of Jamaica* (3-4). His father, George Ellis, died shortly before his birth, leading to a struggle over his inheritance between his paternal uncle, John Ellis, the father of the politician Charles Rose Ellis, and his maternal relations, which continued for some time, although he eventually regained control of the Ellis Caymanas estate, and was always wealthy (4-5). He was raised and educated in England, attending Trinity College, Cambridge (Rigg). While Ritson arrived at the study of medieval romance through a background in antiquarian study, Ellis approached the subject more obliquely. His early writing was in a variety of forms and genres. The earliest publications which can be attributed to him are light verse. In 1776, when Ritson was beginning his studies in the British Museum, Ellis published, anonymously, *Bath: Its Beauties and Amusements*, a brief mock-heroic satire on 'BATH, the divine *Hygeia*'s favour'd child, / Where Pigs were once, and Princes now are boi'd' (1).<sup>25</sup> This was followed by *Poetical Tales of Gregory Gander, Knight*, a small collection of eight short, humorous, bawdy pieces, condemned by both the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review* for 'licentiousness' and praised by Walpole (*Critical Review* 48: 236; *Monthly Review* 61:75; Rigg). This includes his first known response to a medieval work, an obscene adaptation of the 'Wife of Bath's Tale', which squeezes a small amount of humour out of the incongruous layering of many different literary conventions and social codes.

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<sup>25</sup> As Bronson establishes (15), Ritson experimented with satirical verse as a young man in Stockton, although his model was Hall Stevenson rather than Pope.

As Ritson began his first forays into literary antiquarian controversy, Ellis became increasingly involved in politics. He accompanied the diplomat Lord Malmesbury to The Hague in 1784, to Germany and Italy in 1791, and to Lille in 1797 (Rigg). He was a contributor first to the *Rolliad*, and later to the *Anti-Jacobin* (Gawthrop 5). In addition to satire, he began to publish more serious works, including *A Memoir of a Map of the Countries Comprahended between the Black Sea and the Caspian* (1788) and *History of the Late Revolution in the Dutch Republic* (1789). Through his cousin, Charles Rose Ellis, he became acquainted with Canning (Gawthrop 5). In 1796 he became a member of parliament, as junior member for Seaford (his cousin was the senior member), although he never spoke in the Commons and did not stand for re-election in 1802 (5). With his cousin he formed a part of the West Indian interest (5).

Ellis's first work on early English literature was the *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (1790). The first edition of this work and the revised second edition of 1801 (and subsequent editions) are radically different, so much so that it is misleading to consider them the same work. The first edition is a single volume of lyric poetry from the reigns of Henry VIII to Charles II, with a short preface. The preface, like those of Ritson's collections from the same period, is used to describe and defend the nature and scope of the collection, and negotiate its relationship with similar works. Ellis had intended to collect 'all the most beautiful small poems which had been published in this country during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and it was conceived that, by classing the several authors under the reigns in which they flourished, the collection would unite the advantages of a poetical commonplace book with those of a history of English poetry' (i). His plans, however, were frustrated by 'the difficulty of procuring a sufficient stock of materials' (i). Ellis engages with the difficulties of forming a collection that was both beautiful and historical, tracing the emergence of 'a delicacy and even fastidiousness of taste, as could not be gratified by the irregular compositions of our early poets' to Queen Anne's reign, and noting that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fell entirely outside the scope of the 'general and uniform edition of our poets... published under the auspices of Dr. Johnson' (ii). Ellis makes no claims for accuracy, adopting modern orthography and supressing 'not only several lines, but occasionally very long

passages' (v). Neither does he claim originality in his selection: for 'those who possess a complete poetical library, the following collection will, of course, be useless' (iii). He concludes the collection with 'The Ivy' a modern piece that is 'so beautiful an imitation of the old poets, that it is presumed every reader will see it with pleasure in this collection' (322).

Ellis's next literary antiquarian work was the highly mediated two volume edition of Gregory Lewis Way's *Fabliaux or tales, abridged from French Manuscripts* (1796, 1800). In 1779, the French antiquarian Pierre Jean-Baptiste Legrand d'Aussy had published a collection of extracts and translations of *Fabliaux ou Contes des douzième et treizième siècles d'après les manuscrits*. In 1796, Way published the first volume of an adaptation of this work, further selected and translated into English, with an introductory 'Sonnet to G.E. (to whom the translator is indebted for the preface and many of the notes to this volume)':

Thou, gentle friend, hast spied me how I pac'd  
Through stange delightful realms of Fairy-land,  
And tangled arbours trimm'd with rustick hand,  
And alleys green, for lack of tread grown waste:

Then be the labour thine, for thy command  
Hath wray'd my homely deeds to nicer eyes,  
Noting these scenes in long-past ages plann'd  
To teach our courtly throng their brave device.

The mickle toil be thine, and thine the price;  
So I may roam, as likes my wandering vein,  
To other bowers nigh lost in time's disguise,  
And muse of loyal knights' and ladies' pain;  
And, as I search each desert dark recess,  
Lament such change of fortune favourless.

The preface is wide ranging yet desultory, demonstrating many of Ellis's concerns, which he would develop more fully in later works. Way died in 1799, and the second volume of the work was published under a slightly different title, identifying the 'late Gregory Lewis Way, Esq' as the translator and promising 'A preface, notes, and appendix, by G. Ellis, Esq.'. The appendix begins by describing the works which Way had intended or begun to translate but not completed before his death, providing some of the incomplete fragments (225). Once the reader had been provided with 'all that Mr. Way had designed for publication in this volume' Ellis offers 'a few small pieces of poetry, which I hope I am not too partial in considering as eminently beautiful, and which were originally intended for a work very nearly analogous to the present, were found among his papers' (273). These were translations of another French work, *Corps d'Extraits de Romans de Chevalerie, par M. Le Comte de Tressan*, who, Ellis explains,

performed, for the authors of the old romances, the same good office which M. Le Grand has executed in favour of the *Fabliours*: but that instead of barely analysing the contents of their ponderous volumes, he has carefully selected, from his originals, all those natural and simple passages which are occasionally found even in the productions of the most barbarous ages, and has preserved the few poetical pieces interspersed in them, with some few corrections indeed, but without adding any embellishments inconsistent with their antique and Gothic character. (273)

Ellis praises the plan developed by Tressan, which provides the model for his later *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*. Combining carefully chosen extracts with a prose paraphrase, Tressan, by 'happily contrasting the elegance and perspicuity of modern language with the quaint simplicity' of the earlier texts, is able to 'give such variety to his style, that the attention of the reader is kept awake through a series of events often disgusting by their improbability, tiresome by their sameness and their number, and so unconnected as to bid defiance to all the resources of method and arrangement' (274). Way, Ellis reports, thought that a translation into English could preserve the strengths of this work. Ellis provides the surviving fragments of Way's incomplete translations of *Tristan de Léonois*, *Floire*

*et Blancheflor* and Tressan's speculative reconstruction of a portion of the *Chanson de Roland*. He then offers readers 'The Ivy' for a second time, identifying Way as the author, with the explanation that Way had sent it to him with a selection of extracts from a sixteenth-century miscellany when he was in the process of preparing the *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (288). Ellis admits that he initially accepted it as an early work, until Way wrote to inform him that it was his own composition, a demonstration of Way's ability to compose verse in a convincing yet elegant imitation of an earlier style (289). After a brief biography of Way, who led an otherwise uneventful life, Ellis describes his plan to conclude the collection with 'a specimen of the poetical style which prevailed in England, at the time when many of the French fabliaux were composed', Lydgate's translation of the 'Lay de Oiselet' first printed under the title of 'The Chorle and the Byrde' (296). Ellis instead selects for this purpose 'a much more amusing poem, which had not hitherto appeared in print, and which is cited with some praise in Dr. Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, and in Mr. Warton's *History*', *Launfal*, a fourteenth-century translation of a Breton lay (297). Ellis assures readers that

the transcript from the original MSS. in the Cotton Library, was made by a gentleman on whose fidelity the reader may safely rely; and that in the printed copy I have exactly adhered to that transcript: this old mode of spelling will, perhaps, at first appear rather puzzling to some readers; but I have endeavoured, by means of glossarial notes, to render the story as intelligible as I could, without departing from the obsolete orthography. (297)

Ellis adds line numbers, modern punctuation and capitalization, and divides the text into six-line stanzas. This was one of the first publications of the entire text of an early metrical romance, buried deep within the appendix to a highly mediated translation of a French work.

In 1790, Ellis's attempt to collect *Specimens of the Early English Poets* was thwarted by the difficulty of obtaining material. In the second, three-volume edition of 1801, he offers a new preface, explaining that 'this difficulty has been since removed, by the kind assistance of my friends; and the work in its present state contains a selection, made with some care and attention, from a considerable number



of the best poetical libraries in the country' (v-vi). This new edition is constrained not by the shortage of material, but the work required to bring that material to print: 'the reader who shall fairly examine the stock of materials here collected, will not be much surprised if the curiosity of the complier was at length satiated, and if the labour of transcription, became too irksome to be farther continued' (vi). Readers are informed that they will shortly have a more comprehensive picture of early English literature when 'Mr. Ritson shall have printed his "Bibliographia Poetica"' (vi). In its expanded state, the collection needs a new structure, and so is divided into two parts, 'directed to one principal object; which is, to exhibit, by means of a regular series of Specimens, the rise and progress of our language, from the tenth to the latter end of the seventeenth century' (vii). The first part, which forms the first volume, covers the years before the reign of Henry VIII (outside the scope of the first edition), with extracts 'chosen with a view to picturesque description, or to the delineation of national manners; whereas the second division of the work, is meant to exhibit the best models that could be found, in each reign, of regular and finished composition' (vii-viii). In the first portion, the 'historical sketch of the rise and progress of English poetry and language' promised on the title-page is intertwined with the chosen extracts and short texts in a series of short chronological chapters, the texts rigorously subordinated to the overarching narrative. It was this text which Ellis sent to Scott, and worked with Heber to revise.

Nearly fifty, still a member of Parliament, Ellis reinvented himself for a brief period as an expert in early English literature, deeply enmeshed in a network of men studying early English texts. Although Ellis cultivated a more urbane persona than that of Ritson, he was also making a detailed, laborious and time-consuming study of early material. From roughly 1795, he was a relatively frequent user of the manuscript collections of the British Museum. In his letters to Scott he often refers, sometimes self-deprecatingly, to the time-consuming work of deciphering and transcribing his manuscript texts, in the British Museum and the collection of Francis Douce. The *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*, like Ritson's *Ancient English Metrical Romances*, is built upon the foundation of a thorough study of surviving manuscript sources, including where possible the careful collation of different copies and analogues, although given their different editorial principles this

is manifested in different ways. For clarity, a list of the texts included in each collection and the authorities identified by their editors is included as an appendix. There is considerable variation in the names used to refer to these texts and this can sometime cause confusion, particularly in the case of the rarely studied Carolingian texts included in Ellis's collection.

Of Ritson's twelve romances, eight used sources held by the British Museum. Six were taken from the founding manuscript collections (*Ywaine and Gawin*, *Launfal*, *Lybeaus Disconus*, *The Geste of Kyng Horn*, *Emare*, *Sir Orpheo*) one from the Royal Collection presented to the Museum shortly after its foundation (*The Chronicle of Engleland*), and one from an early print copy acquired by the Museum with the Garrick Collection in 1780 (*The Squyer of Lowe Degree*). The English Universities are also represented, with the Bodleian (*The Kyng of Tars and the Soudan of Damas* and *The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell*) and Cambridge University Library (*Le Bone Florence of Rome* and *The Erle of Tolous*) each providing two texts.

Like Ritson, Ellis drew on the founding collections for manuscripts (*Morte Arthur*, *Robert of Cysille*, *The Lyfe of Ipomydon*) and the Garrick Collection for early printed works (*Sir Triamour*, *Sir Eglamour of Artoys*, *Sir Degaré*), as well as the libraries of the English Universities (*Bevis of Hampton*, *Richard Cœur de Lion*, *Sir Isumbras*) and Lincoln's Inn (*Merlin*). He made greater use of private collections than Ritson, taking *Sir Eger*, *Sir Grahame*, and *Sir Gray-Steel*; *Roswal and Lillian*; *Amys and Amylion*, and *Sir Ferumbas* from the collection of Douce, the last from a transcript made by George Steevens from a manuscript owned by Richard Farmer and presented to Douce as a gift (II: 357).

They did not rely exclusively on English collections. The Auchinleck manuscript played a major role in the study of medieval romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as it has done in the centuries since. Compiled in London in the 1330s, the Auchinleck is a remarkable collection of medieval English literature, containing (in its current damaged state), eighteen romances, of which eight are entirely unique (Pearson vii–viii). In 1744, Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck, presented the manuscript to the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh. The Advocates' Library had been founded by the Faculty of Advocates at the end of the seventeenth

century to support the legal instruction of its members, but it had gradually acquired a secondary function as the de facto national library of Scotland, the natural repository for documents of historical importance and national pride.<sup>26</sup> The presence of the manuscript in Edinburgh allowed its contents to be claimed for Scotland. When Scott published his edition of *Sir Tristrem*, he identified the Auchinleck as his source on the title page, and provided a description of the manuscript and its contents as an appendix. Ellis was able, through his connection with Scott, to draw heavily on the Auchinleck manuscript, which provided the primary source for seven of his texts (the second part of *Merlin*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Roland and Ferragus*, *Sir Otuel*, *The Seven Wise Masters*, *Florice and Blaunche flour*, and *Lay le Fraine*), and supplemented several others. Ritson discusses the contents of the Auchinleck extensively in his essay and notes, but does not use it as a source for his edited texts, although he includes the entire text of *Horne Childe and Maiden Rimmild* in the notes to *Kyng Horn*. The work of Ellis and Ritson (as well as Scott and Weber) was made possible by both the availability of manuscript collections in public libraries and the private assistance of the ‘republic of letters’.

The immediate context for Ritson’s ‘ill-humour and groundless jealousy on the subject of Alexander’ was the work of Park, Ellis, and Douce on an edition *Kyng Alisaunder*, an early fourteenth-century romance describing the life of Alexander the Great, surviving in a manuscript held in Lincoln’s Inn Library, another held in the Bodleian Library, and a fragment in the Auchinleck (Weber xxxvii). Thomas Warton had included extracts from the Bodleian manuscript in his *History of English Poetry*, attributing it to Adam Davie, the author of a religious poem in the same manuscript. Although the early nineteenth-century scholars thought it particularly beautiful, it is rarely studied today.

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas I. Rae, ‘The Origins of the Advocates’ Library’ and Ian Gordon Brown, ‘“This Old Magazine of Antiquities” The Advocates’ Library as National Museum’ in *For The Encouragement of Learning: Scotland’s National Library 1689-1989*, eds. Patrick Cadell and Ann Matheson (Edinburgh: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1989). The other essays in this collection provide further evidence of how this function influenced acquisitions.

The correspondence between Ellis and Scott provides sporadic descriptions of their progress. In July of 1801, Ellis wrote to Scott that he and Douce had examined the poem and Park was compiling their notes:

Adam Davie's (If it be Adam Davie's) life of Alexander has passed through my hands & Douce's, and Park is, I believe, now at work on a glossary compiled from our notes. It is really a noble poem. (11r)

Scott offered of a transcript of the Auchinleck fragment, which Ellis thought unnecessary, replying 'Our copy is complete, and does not I think require an improvement beyond what a collation with the Bodleian MS will furnish' (15v). Ellis underestimated the scope of the project, and the work was delayed. In May of 1802 Ellis wrote to Scott to thank him for the transcripts of *Merlin* and, observing the 'astonishing similarity of style', suggested that *Kyng Alisaundre* might be claimed as a Scottish text:

[I]t is well worth claiming, as you would have known long ere this, had it not been discovered by Heber that the Bodleian copy contained about 1500 verses more than that of Lincoln's Inn which Park had transcribed, in consequence of which it will be necessary for him to repair to Oxford, which, being at present hard at work on some other subjects, he cannot conveniently do. (39r)

This never was convenient, and the edition was abandoned until 1810, when Henry Weber incorporated it into his collection of *Metrical Romances*, completing the collation and publishing the poem with the notes assembled by Ellis, Douce, and Park and the prose chapter headings written by Ellis (xxxvii-xxxviii).

*Kyng Alisaunder* provides a case study of the process through which an edition of a medieval text was prepared at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The text is identified through Warton's *History of English Poetry*, although much of Warton's description has to be revised, and his attribution of the poem to Adam Davie becomes a running joke. Examination of the manuscripts reveals that, as Ritson had long argued, Warton is unreliable. Most significantly, transcripts provide an intermediary stage between medieval manuscript and nineteenth-century print. Park produced a transcript, which could then circulate within a collaborative network; each member providing a different element of expertise and soliciting more

information from their contacts. The logistics of travel between London and Oxford delayed the project, and the transcript and notes, with layers of revision by multiple parties, circulated as a part of nineteenth-century manuscript culture for a decade before reaching print in Edinburgh.

The circulation of transcripts was fundamental to the study and publication of medieval texts in Britain during the nineteenth century. Here, the logistics of publication intersected with the social practice of literary antiquarian research. The production of transcripts was an essential favour that antiquaries could provide for one another, requiring diplomatic expertise, and often a considerable expenditure of time and effort. One of the few surviving letters from Ritson to Scott provides an illustration of the importance of the exchange of transcripts. Ritson thanks Scott for the transcript of *Sir Orpheo*, remarking on the difference between the Auchinleck and the Harley copy, on which he based his edition (*Letters* II: 218). In turn, Ritson encloses a copy of a ‘very ancient poem . . . which I learn from Mr. Ellis, you are desirous to see’ (II: 218). He also includes a transcript of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s life of Merlin, requesting that ‘you will have the goodness to return me at you leisure, as I have some intention of printing it’ (II: 219). Transcripts could be exchanged, and function as gifts, but had the potential to go astray. Sending Scott a transcript of a work he intended to print was an act of trust on Ritson’s part.

Ritson’s ‘groundless jealousy’ arose from his fear that *Kyng Alisaunder* would pre-empt his own collection, leading to accusations that he had been ill-treated and misled by Park and Ellis, who had assured him it would not. In his letter to Anderson, Park expresses exasperation, having assumed that the matter had been resolved before Ritson’s trip to Edinburgh:

The futility of his fears respecting Adam Davie’s getting the start of his K. Horn &c. will be sufficiently apparent when I inform you, that his first volume is partly printed, & and that all his copy is prepared, whereas Davie’s geste has not yet proceeded to press . . . Besides, was the whole work ready for appearance before the public eye, I do assure you that it sh<sup>d</sup> be withheld till he marched forward in the van of Editorship. (22.4.10 213v; Bronson 257)

Ritson's 'ill-humour' illustrates the social conventions and expectations which governed literary antiquarian work. Ritson expected others to know of his plans and to share their plans honestly with him. Furthermore, Park's claim that Ellis 'had collected materials himself, at a great expense, for a similar publication & had abandoned his design solely with a view of serving his Calumniator' is not supported by Ellis's description of his progress. At this point, Ellis had rough plans for a collection of prose abstracts of English metrical romance, but had only begun to collect his materials.

Ellis's letters to Scott allow a rough timeline of his progress to be assembled. In April of 1801, Ellis writes to Scott, mentioning that 'My project to which you so kindly offer to contribute your valuable assistance' is still in its infancy, and responding to Scott's offer with several requests:

I am extremely obliged to you for your kind offer respecting the transcription of MSS. If you could find a person willing to copy the romance of Sir Otuel, I should be very happy to give him whatever you may judge a fair remuneration for his trouble. Douce possesses, & I mean to transcribe a romance on the subject of Charlemagne, or rather of Fieràbras, but I presume that Sir Otuel must be different from that. Mr Park is now transcribing for me a romance called Merlin which I suspect to be the same with yours, but when it shall be finished I will request you to enable me to supply so much of the story as shall prove to be deficient, the Lincoln's Inn MS. being evidently imperfect. (2r)

From this period, transcripts were exchanged frequently between London and Edinburgh: Ellis drew extensively on the Auchinleck manuscript for his *Romances*, without ever examining it personally; Scott likewise relied heavily on the French fragments of *Sir Tristran* in Douce's collection. However, Ellis never mentions remuneration again: these are gifts, and while there is an expectation of reciprocal exchange, this can never be explicitly demanded.

Many of these transcripts still exist. In *Scott, Chaucer, and Medieval Romance*, Jerome Mitchell assembles a comprehensive list of the texts known to Scott, incidentally providing a list of the transcripts provided by Ellis held in

Abbotsford today, including *Arthour and Merlin*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *Richard Cœur de Lyon*, *Roswall and Lillian*, *Sir Egare*, *Sir Ferumbras*, and *Sir Isumbras*. Scott's knowledge of medieval romance, unrivalled except by Ellis, Ritson, Leyden, Weber, and Douce, was a pervasive influence on his work, as Mitchell painstakingly demonstrates. Scott gained this knowledge through his access to the Auchinleck and his participation in antiquarian manuscript culture.

Ellis provided Scott with frequent reports on the progress of his own and Ritson's collections. Although the transcripts promised by Scott (and prepared by Leyden's younger brother) began to arrive in the summer of 1801, Ellis admitted that 'My grande opus on Romances is not yet begun, having been delayed by my attention to the aforesaid life of Alexander; but I mean to be very busy this autumn'(10r-11v). That autumn saw Ritson's visit to Edinburgh, at which point Park reported to Anderson that '[Ritson] has two Vols of metrical romances proceeding to press, & Mr. Ellis intents to follow them up with an extended project' (Bronson 249; 22.4.10 209v). However, both projects would be delayed. In October of 1802, Ellis reported to Scott that 'Ritson has not yet published his romances (I beg his pardon Romanceës) because Nicol has very naturally taken the alarm at the enormous portion of blasphemy' in his 'Dissertation', noting that the necessary cancels would destroy any hope of profit (40r-40v). In February 1803, Ellis used Leyden's visit to London on his way to India as an opportunity to have him look over what had been completed:

I have brought up to town & put into the hands of Leyden all that I have hitherto done (which is but little) in the prosecution of my plan . . . . But when I shall be able to report progress God knows – for I have a thousand avocations which steal away my time and, which is more fatal to my progress, destroy the frame of mind which is necessary to help one to write quiet nonsense. (47v)

It is clear that at this time, Ellis has completed only a small fraction of his intended design, transposing the romances of *Guy of Warwick*, *Richard Cœur de Lion*, *Sir Triamour*, and *Sir Isumbras*. Even as late as July 1804, after Ritson's death, it seems that the only a fraction of the work was complete, as Ellis responded to an offer of a fresh transcript of *Lay le Fraine* (Longman and Rees having misplaced one sent

earlier) with the assurance that ‘I am in no immediate hurry for it, because, though I have finished my introduction, appendix No 1 and No 2, and the first part of *Merlin*, I have the second part of *Merlin*, *Morte Arthur*, *Sir Bevis*, *Sir Otuel*, *Feragris* and *Ferumbas* to analyse’ before he could turn to the new material (65r).

Between April 1801, and its publication in 1805, the shape of Ellis’s collection changed dramatically, largely in response to the materials that Scott sent from Edinburgh. An important feature of Ellis’s work was the identification of classes of romances ‘relating to Arthur’ (*Merlin* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*) and ‘relating to Charlemagne’ (*Roland and Ferragus*; *Sir Otuel* and *Sir Ferumbas*). When he first began the project, Park was transcribing *Merlin* from the Lincoln’s Inn manuscript, and Ellis hoped that the Auchinleck copy, if it was the same text, could ‘supply so much of the story as shall prove to be deficient’. Although they do correspond, Lincoln’s Inn covers only the first quarter of the text found in the Auchinleck, and over the course of the summer Ellis moved from assuring Scott ‘I would not willingly trouble you for any more of that Romance’, to the awareness that he absolutely required the continuation, ‘as I did not think there existed any connected metrical history of King Arthur’ and ‘Your *Merlin* added to the metrical *Mort Arture* . . . will make me very strong on the ground of the round-table knights’ (15v). Similarly, Ellis was only able to identify a trio of English romances relating to Charlemagne once he had determined that the texts in the Auchinleck were distinct from the text he meant to transcribe from Douce’s collection, the transcript provided by Steevens. Ellis did not consider *The Seven Wise Masters* worth including until he had read Scott’s description of it in the appendix to *Sir Tristrem*, and requested a transcript in May of 1804, hastily adding notes assembled by Douce to serve as an introduction (62v). Ellis’s *Romances* could not have taken their final form, and would have been an inferior work, without the transcripts that began to flow from Edinburgh in 1801. Despite his frequent delays, an extraordinary amount of work was accomplished in a brief period. Ellis mentions delaying his work, not for Ritson, but until Scott has published the new edition of the *Minstrelsy* in 1803, and *Sir Tristrem* in 1804, so that he could build upon Scott’s historical arguments as the foundation for his introductory essay. Park’s claim that Ellis had collected materials



for his own work before resigning the project to Ritson is an overstatement, one which masks a more complex collaborative process.

When Scott first wrote to Ellis to offer him the contents of the Auchinleck, Ellis replied with the ambitious suggestion that Scott publish the other romances in the manuscript. Ellis's suggestion corresponded with plans already developing in Edinburgh. In March of 1801, Leyden wrote to Heber, promising him a list of the contents of the Auchinleck manuscript:

Immediately upon receiving yours of Decr. 23! (the date is suspicious) I called on Mr Scott and we went over the MS. of Romances together and made out a list, with the number of folios contained in each Romance, and the first verse as a specimen of the versification. But before I had time to transcribe it I was forced to go out of town for a fortnight and at my return a few days ago, I found that Mr Scott had retired to his Cottage on the Esk whither I intend to pursue him in a few days when I will send you the Transcript. The age of the different MSS (Romances) is nearly the same and I imagine they may be referred to the reign of Henry VI or VII, perhaps older.... [Leyden reports that he is uneasy about the obscene passages] ... It occurred to both Scott and me that in order to have the best editions of these Romances prepared those of which no other copy exists but in our MS as they may certainly be most accurately printed here, should make a series with *Tristrem*, while those of which you have copies and which you reckon worth the publishing may be improved by adopting the best *variae Lectiones* from our MS. Therefore if Ritson and Mr Ellis will send us down proof sheets of their publications and extracts, Scott and I will collate them accurately with our MS., and return them as quickly possible. Ritson and Ellis may judge of what advantage they imagine this will be to their Editions. (11-12)

At this point, Leyden and Scott are still unsure of which texts are unique copies, and which have counterparts elsewhere. Leyden even suspects that Ritson might have a version of *Sir Tristrem*, and in that case 'there can be no propriety in giving two editions' (12). Leyden assumes that the men working on medieval romance will pool

their resources, adapting their plans as they are informed of the plans of others. A week later, Leyden writes directly to Ellis, offering to collate the proofs of Ritson's romances with the Auchinleck (17). Leyden proposes an extremely efficient and collaborative system, an ambitious project to be undertaken by half-a-dozen men. He offers a clear vision of the publication of medieval romance as a collaborative project. While the reality was considerably messier, the possibility of collaboration, even uneasy collaboration, between men as dissimilar as Ritson and Ellis testifies to the importance of a 'republic of letters'.

Two manuscripts now held in the National Library of Wales provide striking evidence of the practice of Ritson and Ellis. These manuscripts have been extensively described by Simon Meecham-Jones in his 2001 article "'For Mr. Ritson's Collection' – George Ellis, Joseph Ritson and National Library of Wales MSS 5599, 5600c". As Meecham-Jones demonstrates, Samuel Ayscough and an unnamed 'young man' made the transcripts sometime after 1799 from texts held in the British Museum. There are notes in three other hands, identified by Meecham-Jones as Ritson, Ellis, and Douce. He finds some evidence that Ellis might have used these transcripts while preparing his *Romances*, and some suggestions that Ritson might have used them as the base-text for his edition, as a provisional text revised through collation with the original (133-35). As Meecham-Jones argues, the possible use of these transcripts by both men at about the same time suggests a greater degree of mutual assistance than has generally been assumed, and provides evidence of 'how far the editing of medieval romance was achieved by a mutually-supportive small circle of scholars, each 'liberal in his communications', and to some degree dependent on the efforts, insights and encouragement of his fellows'(145).

Two notes on the first folio of MS 5599c in Ellis's hand provide further evidence of practice of this circle. The recto lists 'Romances intended for Mr. Ritson's collection', the verso 'Romances intended for publication by Scott & Leyden':

Scott –	Sir Tristram, making, with preface & notes, a volume
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connected with  
his minstrelsy of  
the border

Leyden –

Otuel  
Roland & Vol 1 – all Charlemagnian  
Vernagus  
Florice &  
Blancheflour

Orfeo &  
Heurodis Vol 2  
Sir Owain  
Lay le Frayne

Clariodus & Vol 3 – by G. Douglas/probably  
Meliades

There will Syr Degairee which will, perhaps, be edited by Leyden  
remain Reinbrun

Meecham-Jones interprets the former as a description of the two manuscripts themselves as a commission ‘for Mr. Ritson’s collection’, and the latter as evidence ‘of Ellis’s close collaboration with what might be named the “Edinburgh circle” of editors and enthusiasts’ (129, 139).

I would offer a different interpretation of the first note. The list of texts ‘intended for Mr. Ritson’s collection’ is identical to the contents of Ritson’s *Romanceës*, and it is unlikely, but not impossible, that Ritson commissioned the transcripts, although he may have used them. I have no better suggestion for the

origin of these transcripts, but I cannot reconcile Meecham-Jones' proposal with the record of Ritson's manuscript requests and the timeline established above. The note is more likely to be a memorandum by Ellis recording his understanding of Ritson's intentions. The second note reflects an ambitious and ultimately unrealized project to publish texts found in the Advocates' Library (*Clariodus*, a sixteenth-century Scottish romance, had been donated by Lord Hailes upon his death in 1792). Notably, there is an attempt to identify a body of romances relating to Charlemagne, and to give it a prominent place in the corpus of English metrical romance, as Ellis would do. Together, these two notes provide a snapshot of the field of romance scholarship in Britain, as understood by Ellis, sometime in 1801 or 1802: many projects are planned and underway, different editors have staked their claims on different texts. Some of these projects were finished and published, but most were not. Within this collaborative network of scholars, an awareness of the plans of others was necessary to prevent inefficient duplication. Ritson's 'splenetic feeling' was not merely the result of individual ill humour but evidence of an expectation of collaboration and accommodation, only visible when Ritson unfairly feared it had been violated.

At this point, Ellis and Scott had reason to hope that booksellers might undertake this project. Writing to Scott in June of 1801, Ellis thanks him for the news that *The Specimens of the Early English Poets* were well received in Edinburgh, remarking that 'They sell pretty well, as Nicol tells me, which I am glad to hear as it seems to prove that a taste for domestic literature is becoming popular' (7r). By the next month, he could report:

Nicol (my publisher) seems to be much pleased with its sale . . . .The work has already done some good in diffusing a taste (or at least an affectation of taste) for literary antiquity, but I would wish to make it a really useful assistant to young Poets by diffusing among them just & rational opinions about the merit of their ancestors' (11v).

Taste, though it can influence poets, is measured in sales, and closely monitored by publishers. In 1803, Southey remarked of his translation of the Iberian romance *Amadis of Gaul* (made possible by Heber, who had lent him his copy), 'I do not expect the book to sell well [...]. Ellis can give a fashion to his own books, but he

cannot make his taste general enough to sell this of mine' (*Letters* 5 May, 1803). Nicol's enthusiasm may account for his willingness to take on Ritson's more risky work, especially if, as Park claimed, Ellis had intervened on his behalf. A change in taste was underway, enough for publishers to risk the publication of Ellis and Ritson's *Romance(s)*, but not, ultimately, enough to sustain the larger project. Prose romance fared little better, and despite its influence on poets when it was published, a new edition of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was difficult to achieve, and both Scott and Southey struggled unsuccessfully for years to find a form acceptable to publishers (Gaines).

Weber's collection of 1810 was the last attempt to realize the project that had seemed possible in 1801, and was recognized as untenable in 1805. In several cases, Weber relied upon the transcripts made earlier in the decade and provided by Ellis, most notably for *Kyng Alisaunder*, as well as for *Richard Cœur de Lion* and others not specified (lxxi-lxxii). Five of the ten romances included in the collection were complete editions of texts transposed by Ellis. Weber positions his collection as the continuation of the work begun by Ritson:

The study of ancient English poetry in general having very rapidly increased within these few years, and given occasion to a great number of publications and selections, it was thought that a second collection of metrical romances of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, excluding all those which have already been published by modern editors, would be highly acceptable to the lovers of ancient literature. (ix)

However, Weber's collection was, as Matthews argues, 'an ill-fated project from the outset' – subscriptions were not forthcoming, Scott withdrew his support, and Weber struggled to find a publisher for a work of far more limited scope than his initial plans (77). Weber had collected far more material than he was able to publish:

It was originally the wish of the editor to rescue all the ancient English romances, or, at least, all those which merit preservation for any reason whatever, from their present precarious existence in manuscript, and difficult accessibility in public libraries, and thus contribute his share to what is so very desirable for the study of the

language, a regular series of English metrical compositions, and to collect material for some future compiler of that great desideratum, a dictionary of the ancient English tongue after the conquest. To his great mortification, however, he was obliged to give up his original plan, and to print a select portion only of the collections he had made and intended for publication. (xi)

Despite the extraordinary and influential accomplishments of the period, the larger project was largely abandoned. Many texts which were studied at the beginning of the century, including the majority of the romances in the Auchinleck, would not be edited and published for several decades.

The ‘deluge’ of works on medieval romance, which appeared in Britain in the first decade of the nineteenth century, was the product of a collaborative network of scholars, and only a portion of the work that they envisioned. The configuration that made these works possible – Scott, Leyden, Anderson, and the Auchinleck in Edinburgh; Ellis, Ritson, Douce, Park, and the British Museum in London; Heber willing to travel between them, and a few publishers willing to take a risk – existed only briefly. Ritson died in 1803; Leyden travelled to India in the same year, dying there in 1811. Although Ellis continued his correspondence with Scott, he did not produce any new literary antiquarian work before his death in 1815. Scott turned to more profitable work. While Heber, Douce, Anderson, and Park continued to investigate early English literature in their different ways, they too turned away from medieval romance to other projects, rarely venturing further back than the Elizabethan period. However, the works that were produced ‘wholly altered the conception of British literature’, a testament to what could be accomplished by ‘dignified sensibility & friendly exertion’.

## Conclusion

In *The Making of Middle English*, Matthews demonstrates that many important features of Percy's work were a result of Percy's immediate circumstances in 1765, as he successfully sought patronage and social capital through his role as editor of the *Reliques*. Ritson's publications can be approached in a similar manner, rather than conflating the Ritson who attacked Percy and Warton in his *Observations* in 1782 with the Ritson who attacked Percy and Warton in the *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* in 1802, or focusing narrowly on one aspect of his research. Ritson's circumstances changed dramatically between his first major publications in 1782 and his final publications in 1802. The reception of his works, and early English literature more generally, experienced further dramatic change in the next twenty years, and in the centuries since.

Despite the narrative promoted by Percy, which presented Ritson's madness as the defining, explanatory feature of all his work, Ritson's health deteriorated dramatically in his final years. Although evidence is limited and fragmentary, Ritson's professional and financial situation varied over time, as did the extent to which he hoped to profit from his publications. In 1782, when Ritson published the *Observations* and the *Remarks*, he was thirty years old. Despite the time and labour he invested in his programme of research in the British Museum and elsewhere, he was, given his background, reasonably professionally successful. As Bronson has established, when his father died in 1777, leaving behind only a small debt, Ritson was able to acquire the house where his mother lived until her death in 1780, and where he continued to support his sister and nephew (66). The Ritson who published the polemic *Observations* and the *Remarks* had been preparing the elegant *Select Collection of English Songs* for some time, and was simultaneously overseeing the publication in Stockton of *Gammer Gurton's Garland*, a collection of nursery rhymes for children, and *The Bishopric Garland: or, Durham Minstrel*, the first in a series of local collections. He had begun to assemble his 'Catalogue of Romances', printing a short sample, and had ambitious plans to edit Shakespeare, although neither of these plans were completed. Ritson had not yet secured the position of Bailiff of the Liberty of the Savoy, although he would do so shortly after his first

publications. The persona which he developed in his publications does not seem to have advanced his career, yet also does not seem to have seriously impeded it.

By the 1790s, Ritson was losing money on his publications. When he sent fifty copies of *Scotish Songs* to Laing early in 1794, he confided, ‘You will scarcely believe that the publication of these two small and unfortunately unequal volumes stands me three hundred pounds. I make up my mind of course, to a considerable loss; which I begrudge the less as it is incurred for the honour of Scotland’ (*Letters* II: 47). Neither the expected loss nor the destruction of the first version of *The Caledonian Muse* dissuaded him from further work, as he ends the letter by announcing his plans to visit Scotland to collect materials for the revised version of that work. In August of the same year,<sup>27</sup> Ritson sent his old friend Harrison his latest publications, *Scotish Songs* and *The English Anthology*, declining for the moment to edit the manuscript of a civil war memoir that Harrison had lent him, ‘which i have carefully transcribed, but dare not yet venture to put to the press, being already in advance, one way or another, above five hundred pounds; a good part of which, i begin to fear, wil never find its way back’ (*Letters* II: 54). Neither loss seems to have caused him to compromise his plans for the *Robin Hood* collection. Ritson’s final months were marred by acute financial difficulties, as the Peace of Amiens resulted in a sudden and devastating loss on the Stock-Exchange, although his final publications were already completed, if not yet printed, when he heard the news (*Letters* II: 236; Bronson 264, 271-272). When Ellis reported to Scott that removing the ‘blasphemy’ from the *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* ‘will effectually put an end to any hopes of profit that either editor or publisher may have expected from them’ he concluded that ‘on this head Ritson is, I am persuaded, very indifferent, though sufficiently alive to vanity’ (40r). Ellis’s letters reveal the complexities of finding an audience for medieval romance: to the scholars and publishers watching closely, the potential audience and market for publications on medieval romance looked promising in June 1801 and dismal in June 1804. The publication of the *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* in 1802 was a calculated risk, on the part of

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<sup>27</sup> Or rather, ‘21 Thermidor. 2d year of the F. Republic’ (*Letters* II: 56).



both Ritson and his publisher Nicol, ultimately unsuccessful in the short term, but not ill-advised.

Matthews establishes a simple opposition: ‘the making of Thomas Percy’, ‘the unmaking Joseph Ritson’; Percy’s success and Ritson’s failure. This formulation, as Matthews demonstrates, reveals a great deal about the study and publication of Middle English at the end of the eighteenth century. Below the surface, there is a more complex opposition. What success meant for Percy, and how his self-fashioning as editor of the *Reliques* achieved his ends, is clear. It is not at all clear what success would entail for Ritson. Certainly he never sought patronage, nor to leverage his antiquarian work into professional advancement. Possibly notoriety and participation in homosocial antiquarian and literary culture, both combative and collaborative, were ends in themselves. Ritson, very publically, pursued intense feuds, and had several severe fallings-out near the end of his life. Yet Ritson’s work also relied upon participation in several overlapping networks, including several generations of northern antiquaries, Shakespearean scholars, Scottish antiquaries, and the men interested in medieval romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As Matthews observes, his works which deal directly with what would now be called Middle English – *Ancient Songs*, the works of Laurence Minot, and *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* – made little attempt to appeal to a general audience. However, many of his other works did, and some of his planned works would have done so, particularly the edition of Shakespeare. Ritson’s editorial practices and publication strategies were defined in part by the differentiation provided by the division of his material into distinct categories and collections. Although Ritson’s *Select Collection of English Songs* did not have the long term significance or influence of *Robin Hood* or *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës*, it played a key role in his self-presentation and indirectly shaped the construction of the more antiquarian works. Ritson’s first major collection, the work for which *Observations and Remarks* laid the groundwork, was an elegant, relatively expensive work for a general audience. Ritson’s practice in *Ancient Songs* was in part defined in contrast to his approach in *A Select Collection of English Songs*, distinct yet complementary, and neither should be considered in isolation.

Ritson prefaced his most elegant work with a description of its selection, organization, and accuracy. Although Ritson's accuracy was widely recognized, if not necessarily valued, Walter Scott, publically and privately, identified selection and organization as Ritson's major failings. As discussed in the introduction, when Scott wrote to Ellis to inquire about Ritson's manuscripts, he valued Ritson's possible collection of 'facts and quotations, which the poor defunct had the power of assembling to an astonishing degree, without being able to combine anything like a narrative, or even to deduce one useful inference' (*Letters of Walter Scott* I: 205). In his review of the *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*, its chief fault, aside from Ritson's outrageous vindictiveness, was the undiscerning 'accumulation of material' (392). Both 'indecent vehemence' and a failure to properly systematize their material, Scott argues, are characteristic faults of antiquaries, exposing them to 'the ridicule which their pursuits are at all times apt to incur' (393). In her work on antiquarianism, ballad collecting, and romance, Susan Manning establishes that 'The ridicule which surrounded antiquaries issued as much from cultural anxiety about the nature, epistemological status and purpose of their activities as from any inherent risibility in the practitioners', attributing this anxiety in part to 'antiquarianism's uncertain conceptual placing and primary rationale in the accumulation of material without subordination to system or theory' which 'rendered its implications ideologically promiscuous and therefore politically suspect' (49). Few antiquaries were as politically suspect as Ritson.

Despite Scott's blanket dismissal, Ritson's publications can be seen as a complex, not always successful attempt to present his accumulated research. Ritson spent his years in the British Museum and elsewhere making himself an expert on the surviving early English and Scottish literary texts available to him. Only a very small portion of this research was deemed of sufficient interest or merit to justify inclusion in printed collections. All of Ritson's publications reflected decisions about the proper division of his research, isolating and establishing English and Scottish traditions and drawing chronological, generic, and interpretive boundaries.

The role that selection played in Ritson's publications is particularly pronounced in his work on medieval texts. In the *Observations*, Ritson presented himself as an expert on early English texts, his authority derived from his

knowledgeable examination of the manuscripts. Percy, appealing for a collection of romances, argued that ‘they are far more spirited and entertaining than the tedious allegories of Gower, or the dull and prolix legends of Lydgate: yet, while so much stress is laid upon the writings of these last, by such as treat of English poetry, the old metrical romances, though far more popular in their time, are hardly known to exist’ (III: viii-ix). As Percy recognized, editors of collections had considerable scope to determine which texts were read, and how the early history of English poetry was conceptualized. In Ritson’s *Bibliographia Poetica*, which promises an exhaustive account of all nameable poets, most of the poetry, especially in the early centuries, is of little interest to Ritson, and has no place in his collections, although he spent a great deal of time and expertise documenting the surviving texts and determining the relationships between them. As discussed above, Ritson’s study of the manuscript and print versions of *Piers Plowman* available to him led to the significant realization that there were ‘two editions (as one may call them)’, reflecting different stages of authorial revision (28-30). Ritson’s documentation of the manuscript texts that were, or could be, attributed to Lydgate is, for the period, truly extraordinary, reflecting untold hours of research. It concludes with a frank admission of disgust:

This is believed to be the completest list of this voluminous, prosaick, and drivelling monk, that can be formed, without access, at least, to every manuscript library in the kingdom, which would be very difficult, if not impossible to obtain.... But, in truth, and fact, these stupid and fatigueing productions, which by no means deserve the name of poetry, and their still more stupid and disgusting author, who disgraces the name and patronage of his master Chaucer, are neither worth the collecting (unless it be as typographical curiosities, or on account of the beautiful illumination in some of his presentation-copys), nor even worthy of preservation (87-88)

The majority of the Middle English verse which Ritson read, in the Reading Rooms of the British Museum and elsewhere, was religious and didactic. Most of the manuscripts he requested were returned after a brief examination and never consulted again. Those which he did study in detail, and which provided the authorities for his

printed collections, contained many different kinds of texts, in French, Latin and English, from which he extracted a very small subset. Ritson's selection determined which texts would be rescued from the libraries and presented to the public.

Within each collection, once the scope had been defined, Ritson used different strategies to balance the accurate presentation of discreet texts with an overarching narrative. The 'Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song' introduced the *Select Collection of English Songs*, providing a historical and national narrative, distinct from the complex internal organization of the collection. The Robin Hood collection was formed from the combination of the 'Life of Robin Hood', the 'Notes and Illustrations Referred to in the Foregoing Life' and thirty-three ballads. The 'Life' offered a simple narrative, the 'Notes and Illustrations' supported, illustrated, complicated and often undermined that narrative, which provided an idiosyncratic organization to the exhaustive collection of diverse material. *Scotish Songs* was introduced by the 'Historical Essay on Scotish Song', in which an authoritative narrative, evidentiary footnotes, and a further set of polemic footnotes compete for space on the page. The 'Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy' presented a huge amount of accumulated material in a rejection of simplistic narratives or overarching theories, introducing, for the first time, a selection of complete texts. The reviewer of the *English Anthology* for the *Critical Review*, as discussed in the third chapter, compared a frequently anthologized work to 'a beautiful statue placed in the midst of a star of walks; it is approached by a number of avenues in all directions, and presents itself in every possible variety of attitude' (197). Ritson did not merely unearth forgotten statues – he carefully laid out paths by which both well-known and obscure works could be approached.

Ritson's reception provides an illuminating case-study of late eighteenth-century periodical culture. Malone and Scott's very different reactions to the *British Critic's* reviews of Ritson's final works illustrate the contested boundaries of personal attack in published criticism, Malone celebrating Nares' brutality while Scott condemned it. Malone's reactions to the predictable differences between the accounts of Ritson in the *British Critic*, *Monthly Mirror* and *Gentleman's Magazine* offers a concise illustration of political commitments of the different publications. Although the authors of the majority of the reviews of Ritson's work cannot be

identified – with several notable exceptions – several periodicals established distinct editorial approaches to Ritson. While the *Critical Review* and the *British Critic*'s responses to Ritson can be broadly characterized as condemnations from a conservative, High-Church perspective, the precise factional configurations resulted in very different reviews, particularly of the *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës*. The *Critical Review* simply condemned the entire subject as offensive to taste, religion, and morality. The *British Critic*, committed to defending Percy, argued that the study of medieval romance was a worthwhile and important project, but one that should have been undertaken by someone else.

A third review of the *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* was published shortly after Ritson's death, in the second volume of the *Annual Review and History of Literature*. Published annually by Longman and Rees for seven years and edited by Arthur Aikin, the *Annual Review* promised 'an arranged over a miscellaneous History of Literature', boasting that 'out of nearly Five Hundred Articles, which compose the present volume, not one-third have made their appearance in any other Review of Books' ('Preface' Vol. 2). The Review is arranged in chapters ('Voyages and Travels', 'Theology and Ecclesiastical Affairs', 'History, Politics, and Statistics', etc.) with each chapter usually given a brief introduction, outlining the important contributions to each field in the preceding year. In the second volume of the *Annual Review*, covering works published in 1802, works on early vernacular literature are identified as key contributions to the field of poetry: Sharon Turner's work on Anglo-Saxon poetry and the Welsh bards are invaluable antiquarian resources; Ritson's *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* 'is a very important service conferred on the literature of his country'; the third volume of Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* 'will add considerably to his reputation as a poet'; the new edition of Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets* is 'elegant and learned' ('Poetry' 511). This emphasis on early vernacular literature is the result of the contributions of Robert Southey, whose copious contributions to the *Annual Review* include reviews of many of the works on early vernacular literature published in the first years of the

nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Although these reviews vary considerably in length and quality, he uses them to present a coherent vision of English poetry at the turn of the century, depicting new publications and forthcoming works (either underway or simply desired) of early literature as a major literary force.

Southey's review of the *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* constructs a poetic history for Ritson's work, beginning with a denunciation of the Augustan poets, who failed to appreciate the genius of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. This failure was manifested most egregiously in the 'Procrustean' adaptations of these authors. Poetry since Pope, in the history sketched by Southey, has been chiefly characterized by a search for new models, with poets looking to Italy and Greece while 'the works of our own antients had been long neglected' (516). This changed with the development of Shakespearean criticism, as 'The growing fame of Shakespere led gradually to a manlier taste':

The business of annotating has at length indeed been carried to excess, so much so as to be disgraceful to the national literature. Commentators swarm upon Shakespere, like flesh-flies over a dead lion. This accidental good however has arisen, that many authors who would else have perished irretrievably in the course of another century, or perhaps another generation, are now secured; they are sought after because they are rare, and will be preserved because they are costly. (516)

The recovery and preservation of early texts as valuable resources for the annotation of canonical authors led to the study of those texts for their own sake, and rendered them literally valuable, ensuring their material survival. Percy's *Reliques* 'must be regarded as the great poetical epoch of the present reign', Southey argues, sacrificing accuracy for popularity, and so creating a renewed taste for ancient poetry (517). As 'Old English poetry now became a favourite branch of literature', and Percy was followed by Warton ('often inaccurate, sometimes hypothetical in his opinions, and

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<sup>28</sup>All reviews in the *Annual Review* were published anonymously. The identifications of Southey's contributions are taken from Kenneth Curry's bibliography. Curry draws on Southey's correspondence, an incomplete bibliography published by his son, and a scrap-book Southey kept of his contributions.

sometimes capricious in his taste') and then by Ellis, who 'earnestly recommended the publication of some of our metrical romances, and such a work has now been executed by Mr. Ritson, of all men living the best qualified for the task, and the most trust-worthy' (517).<sup>29</sup> Ritson is thus provided with a lineage, placed within an explicitly poetical framework. Southey constructs a history in which the evaluation and knowledge of earlier English poets has a profound impact on the writing of poetry, and Ritson's publication has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the writing of contemporary poets. Southey even wrote to Coleridge, recommending the purchase of Ritson's collection: 'The beauty of the common stanza will surprise you' (*Letters of Robert Southey* 14 Mach 1803).

While Southey provides critiques of Ritson's work, his negative evaluations are qualitatively different from those of the other reviews. Ritson is presented as a well-known figure (within the relevant circles), known for 'laudable and conscientious accuracy' on the one hand, and 'the unhappy infirmity of his temper' on the other (517). Yet the condemnation of the more inflammatory passages is perfunctory. Upon the reaching the first such passage Southey merely declares:

We will not enter upon the useless task of correcting Mr. Ritson for his course and impudent language:

"let Gryll be Grill, and have his hoggishe mind!"

It is our duty to express a deep and decided disapprobation and disgust at such passages; and having expressed it, to consider his literary opinions with the attention and deference due to the high and honourable rank which he holds in this department of literature. (518)

Southey's reference to Spenser's *Faerie Queene* neatly enacts his commitment to an awareness of earlier English literature. Rescued from an enchantment, Grill reproaches his rescuers for transforming him back to a man from a hog. The Palmer responds with the observation that some people resist attempts to save them, and must be left to their own devices. The reference is thus dismissive, and potentially religiously charged, and yet it allows the reviewer to relinquish the duty of

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<sup>29</sup> A footnote explains that 'this article was received by the editor before the death of Mr. Ritson' (517).

correction. From this point forward, Ritson's arguments are mainly evaluated as 'literary opinions' rather than moral failings, though his bad temper is occasionally noted. Southey frequently disagrees with Ritson's claims in the dissertation. However, they are nearly always evaluated on Ritson's own terms: rather than reproach for a failure of deference, questions are argued with recourse to evidence. Where Southey challenges Ritson's claims that particular kinds of texts do not exist, he does so by naming counterexamples.

Throughout the review, Southey gestures towards other works, especially those reviewed in the same volume. Thus an evaluation of Ritson's conclusions about the origins of romance ends with a reflection that 'a more probable origin of the machinery of romance, has been assigned in the preface to the late translation of *Amadis*' (520). This is of course Southey's own work. Elsewhere, a passing mention of Saxon literature after the conversion to Christianity results in an aside that 'whatever relates to the literary history of this period, will doubtless be collected by the indefatigable historian of the Anglo-Saxons' [Turner] (522). Southey frequently refers to works which might be published in the future, either planned, in progress, or simply desired. A discussion of Ritson's description of Turpin and Geoffrey of Monmouth is interrupted by the wish that 'Mr. Ritson, or some equally able antiquarian, would draw out the *family trees* of these two great roots, such a pedigree would greatly elucidate the history of romance' (522). Similarly, a passing mention of Layamon's *Brut* elicits the wish that 'The Society of Antiquaries, as to the shame of England we have no academy, should publish this valuable specimen of our earliest work' (523). In many cases, his responses to gaps in Ritson's knowledge are presented not as simply as corrections to Ritson, but as enthusiastic assertions about work that has yet to be undertaken. Ritson has corrected Warton's claims about 'the origin of the Welsh romances' but 'he is not possessed of sufficient data to establish his own' (520). For this necessary data, Southey looks to Owen's work on the Mabinogion and the 'very able and learned vindicator of the Welsh bards' [Turner] (520). The attempts to disentangle the sources of the existing romance texts leads to the observation that 'much must be done': the German metrical romances have not been studied, and 'above all, to explain the romantic history of Arthur, the Mabinogion must be translated' (523). Not only have several important works been



recently published, but many more are in progress. Earlier in the same volume, Southey's chief criticism of Godwin's *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* was that it assumed its audience was entire ignorant of medieval culture and literature, despite the information that could be found 'in Warton, in Henry, in Grose, in St. Palaye, Percy, Ritson, and Ellis; books which are in every private library, at least in every library where two quarto volumes upon the life of Chaucer can be expected find a place' (464). In the history that Southey presents, the status and understanding of early texts had changed dramatically over the course of the eighteenth century, reshaping the contents of private libraries.

Southey's engagement with Ritson's opening dissertation is strikingly different from that of the other reviewers. Equally striking is his engagement with the poetry of the collection, which is far more extensive than in any other review. Lengthy extracts are provided, often without apology for the archaic language. They are approached as poetry, not simply as grist for historical debates. 'Yawain and Gawin' is described at length, with the conclusion 'This is an excellent romance' (526). The metrical structures of many of the poems are described and compared. 'Le Bone Florence of Rome' is praised for its 'artfully constructed' narrative, and Southey's summary is embroidered with frequent quotations, foregrounding the grotesque bodily threats which characterize that text (530). He compares the pathos of the heroine's suffering in 'Emare' to the analogous description in Chaucer, preferring the former. He describes the often complex plot of 'King Horn', and includes a long extract from a key scene, beginning with the observation that 'It language will wear an uncouth aspect to many of our readers, but the lapidary will perceive the value of the brute diamond' (527). Southey addresses himself to the subset of readers who have the skill and taste to recognize the true value of the poetry, concluding with the declaration that 'there has rarely, if ever, appeared in this country a publication so valuable to the antiquary, the philologist, and the poet' (533).

A new study of Ritson may not be 'awaited with breathless eagerness' (Bronson xi). However, there is still much that can be gained from a close examination of his work and its reception. For Ritson himself, this is largely a matter, as Bronson found, of 'small adjustments, a fairer emphasis, a clearer definition' (xi).

While an awareness of Ritson's context can be used to better understand his work and reception, a nuanced analysis of Ritson's practice and publications can be used to better understand his context. Rather than an anachronistic or deranged anomaly, Ritson embodied many of the tensions and contradictions of the period. His work relied upon both competition and collaboration. He pursued intense feuds and relied upon friendships and favours. Dismissive evaluations of his work always coexisted with qualified respect. Ritson's polemic works were not unusual, and presented a case for his own authority and expertise, grounded in the research made possible in public collections. Although Ritson never found a bookseller 'not of our faction' to publish his edition of Shakespeare, as Malone feared, Shakespearean editing and scholarship, as Southey argued, played a key role in the changing reception and status of early literature. Ritson undertook an extraordinary programme of research in what would now be seen as different fields, selecting, organizing, interpreting and presenting that research in a wide range of publications for different audiences.

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Table 1: Manuscripts Requested, April 1776-July1782

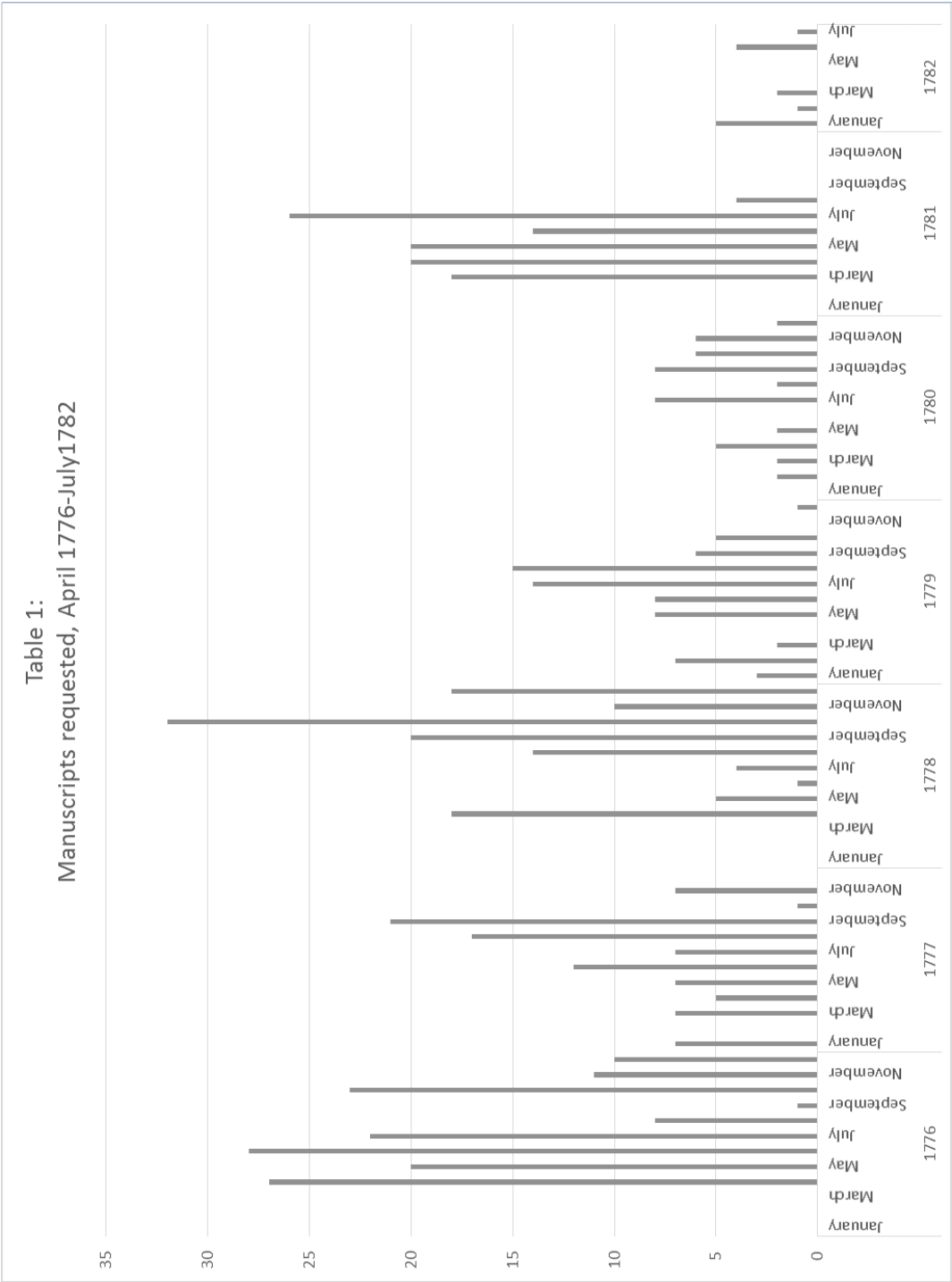
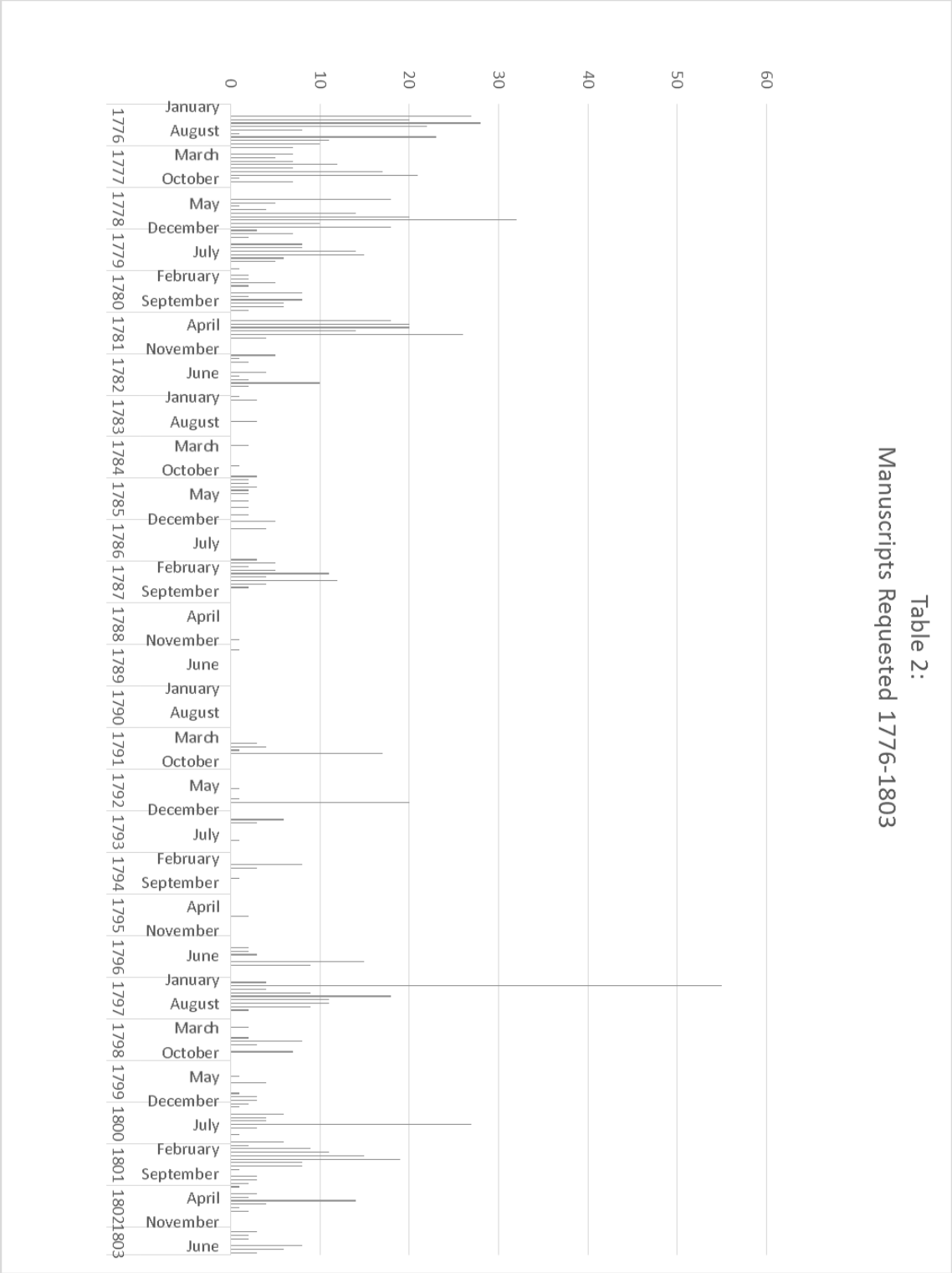
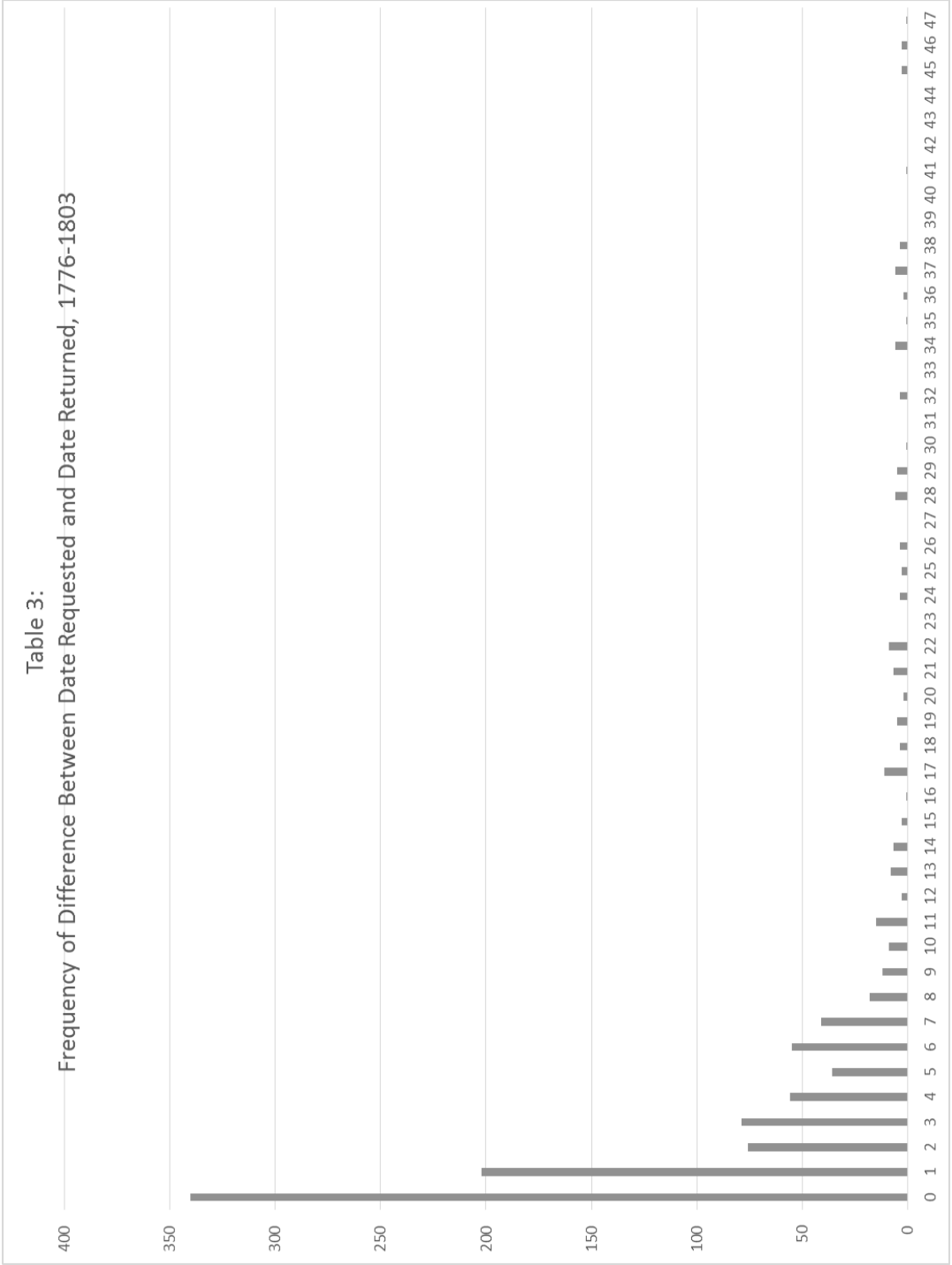


Table 2: Manuscripts Requested, 1776-1803



**Table 3: Frequency of Difference Between Date Requested and Date Returned, 1776-1803**



## Appendix: Table of Contents and Authorities

### *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës, Selected and Publish'd by Joseph Ritson*

#### Ywaine and Gawin

The onely ancient copy of the present poem is contain'd in the Cotton Ms. Galba E. IX, which seems to have been written in the time of Richard II. or toward the close of the fourteenth century; and not, as appear'd to Warton, who knew nothing of the age of MSS. and probably never saw this, "in the Reign of king Henry the sixth". (229)

#### Launfal Miles

The onely ancient copy of this excellent romance, known to be now extant, is contain'd in a manuscript of the Cotton-library, (Cotton Caligula A. II.) written, it would seem, in or about the reign of Henry VI....Two copys are preserve'd, in our own library, of the French original, by *Marie de France*, a Norman poetess of the thirteenth century. (242-43)

## Vol II

#### Lybeaus Disconus

This ancient romance is preserve'd in the Cotton MS. already mention'd, mark'd Caligula A. II. from which it is here giveën. About the latter half of another copy is one of sir Matthew Hales MSS. in the library of Lincolns-inn, apparently a different translation, but onely containing, as usual, numberless various readings; a third is say'd by doctor Percy to be in his folio MS. (253)

#### The Geste of Kyng Horn

This romance, the most ancient, it is believe'd, that exists in the Engleish language, (unless we except the *Tristrem* of Thomas Rymour), and of which no more than one single copy is extant, is preserve'd in a MS. of the Harleian library, in the British Museum, number 2253, and written, apparently, in the time of kyng Edward the

second, by some French or Norman scribe, by whom, likewise, the poem itself may have been compose'd in the preceding reign. (264)

#### Horn-child & maiden Rimnild

In a large and valuable manuscript, of the fourteenth century, in the library of the faculty of Advocates, Edinburgh, number'd W.4.1. and being a present from the late lord Auchinleck, is an excellent, but, like almost every other in the volume, imperfect, romance, very different from the present, of "*Horne childe & maiden Rimnild*", in stanzas. (267)

#### The Kyng of Tars

This pious legend is taken out of an immense folio in the Bodleian library, known by the title of *Manuscript Vernon*, being a present from Edward Vernon esquire, formerly of Trinity-college, who commanded a company for the king in the civil wars, and in whose family it appears to have been for many years. The writing is, apparently, of the fourteenth century....Another copy, of equal, if not greater antiquity, but imperfect at the end, is preserve'd in the Auchinleck MS. in the Advocates library, Edinburgh. Scarcely two-lines together are exactly alike; but it is not, upon the whole, a better copy, except as it, in one place, supplys an omission. (320-21)

#### Emare

The immediate French original of the ancient and excellent romance (here given from a unique copy in the Cotton manuscript, Caligula, A. II.) is not known to be preserve'd, though so frequently refer'd to in the poem itself. (323)

#### Sir Orpheo

There are two copys of this poem; one, from which it was transcribe'd, among the Harleian manuscripts, number 3810; and another in the Auchinleck manuscript (W.4.I. number lii), in the Advocates-library, Edinburgh: each more or less imperfect. The latter, which omits the prologue, and commenceës, abruptly,



“Orpheo was a ryche king,”

is much longer than the poem here printed, which seems abridge’d from it, by considerable omissions, many of the remaining lines being the same: but whether it be a translation from a French original (which, at least, is sufficiently probable) there is no mean to ascertain. Another fragment in the same MS. (num. xxxv), though upon a different subject, begins, precisely, like the Harleian copy, but is intitle’d *Lay le freine* (The tale of the ash), and, apparently, a version of Mary’s poem under the same title. (334)

#### Chronicle of England

Of this old metrical chronicle (transcribe’d from a manuscript of the royal library (12 C XII) there is another copy in that of the faculty of advocates, all-ready notice’d. (337)

#### Le Bone Florence of Rome

The onely copy of this excellent old romance is extant in a paper MS. in bishop Mores collections, in the publick library of the University of Cambridge (Num. 690), written, it seems, in or about the time of king Edward IV. from which it has been, and, it is hope’d, carefully transcribe’d. (340)

[Now Cambridge ff.2.38]

#### The Earle of Tolous

This romance is printed from a transcript made, for the editour, by his amiable and accomplish’d friend the late John Baynes, from the MS. in the publick library of the university of Cambridge already describe’d. There is another copy in the Ashmolean museum (45, 4to), of which doctor Percy has got a transcript, and a third (imperfect) in the library of Lincoln-cathedral. (342-43)

[Now Cambridge ff.2.38]

#### The Squyr of Lowe Degre

This strange and whimsycal, but genuine Engleish, performance is here given from a copy in quarto, and black-letter, without date,

“Imprinted at London by me Wyllam Copland,” extant among mister Garricks old plays, now in the British museum (K. vol. 9).

The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell

The present poem...is now republish'd from an old quarto pamphlet in black-letter, and without date, “Imprynted at London by me Willyam Copland,” before 1568...The copy made use of, in the Bodleian-library, is the onely one known to exist. (355)

*Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances, Chiefly Written During the Early Part of the Fourteenth Century; to Which is Prefixed An Historical Introduction, Intended to Illustrate the Rise and Progress of Romantic Composition in France and England. By George Ellis, Esq.*

Romances Relating to Arthur

Merlin Part I

‘The following abstract was made from a transcript of the MS. No. 150, in the Library of Lincoln’s Inn; and some deficiencies were afterwards supplied, by the kindness of my friend Mr. Walter Scott, from the more antient and perfect copy in the Auchinleck MS.’ (I: 194)

Merlin Part II

‘The following abstract is made from a transcript of the Auchinleck MS. communicated to the editor by Mr. Scott’ (I: 233)

Morte Arthur

‘This romance was never printed, but exists in MS. in the Harleian library. (MS. 2252.) The late Mr. Ritson was of the opinion that it was versified from the prose work of the same name, written by Malory, and printed by Caxton; in proof of which, he contended that the style is marked by an evident affectation of antiquity. But in truth it differs most essentially from Malory’s work, which was a mere compilation; whilst it follows, with tolerable exactness, the French romance of Lancelot; and its phraseology, which perfectly resembles that of Chester, and other authors of the 15th century, betrays no marks of affectation.’ (I: 308)

Saxon Romances

Guy of Warwick

[After a discussion of surviving printed copies]

A most beautiful and perfect MS. of this poem is preserved in the library of Caius college, Cambridge (A 8), and another in the public library (More 690); but the most curious and antient are two fragments contained in the Auchinleck MS. at Edinburgh, of which I

have availed myself, as far as possible, in the following abstract. (II: 3-4).

#### Sir Bevis of Hamptoun

Sir Bevis, whatever may be his demerits, appears to have enjoyed a high degree of popularity. Three MS. copies of this romance in English verse, are still extant in our public libraries; viz. in the Auchinleck MS. of the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh; in the public Library, Cambridge; and in that of Caius College. A fourth (Dr. Monro's) was in the possession of the late Dr. Farmer.... The following abstract was principally taken from the Caius Coll. MS. the omissions in which have been generally supplied by Pynson's printed copy. (II: 91)

#### Anglo-Norman Romance

##### History of Richard Coeur de Lion

Of the MS. copies now known to exist, the most antient is a fragment in the Auchinleck MS. in the Advocates' library at Edinburgh: this, however, contains only two leaves; a second fragment is amongst the Harleian MSS. No. 4690; and a third, which belonged to the late Dr. Farmer, is now in the possession of Mr. Douce. The most perfect extant copy is in the library of Caius college, Cambridge; but even in this several leaves are wanting.

The following abstract is principally taken from the Caius coll. MS., the omissions of which were supplied in one place from Mr. Douce's MS., and in all others from the printed copy; which, upon collation, was found to differ from it only by the occasional substitution of a more modern phraseology, where the MS. was probably considered by the printer as too antiquated to be intelligible. (II: 172)

#### Romances Relating to Charlemagne

##### Roland and Ferragus

This romance, I believe, was never printed; neither is it known to exist in any other than the Auchinleck MS., from which a transcript was sent to me by my friend Mr. Scott. (II: 291)<sup>30</sup>

#### Sir Otuel

I do not know that it was ever printed; but it is preserved in MS., though in an imperfect state, in the Auchinleck volume. The fragment contains 1738 lines, and is written in couplets with considerable spirit and animation. A second MS., in six-lined stanzas, is in the possession of W. Fillingham, Esq. The style of this is much more languid and feeble, resembling pretty nearly the diction of the romance which we have just examined. It has, however, the merit of completing the story, and of furnishing a paraphrase of Turpin's Chronicle from the period of the death of Ferragus to the battle of Roncescalles. (II: 313)<sup>31</sup>

#### Sir Ferumbras

The following romance, I believe, was never printed. A MS. copy of it existed in the library of the late Dr. Farmer, and a transcript from this copy, made by the late Mr. Steevens, was presented by him to my friend Mr. Douce, who kindly permitted me to re-transcribe it. It is professedly translated from the French, and contains 3386 lines. The original may possibly be the "Fierabras," of which there is a copy in Bibl. Reg. 15 E VI. (II: 356)<sup>32</sup>

#### Romances of Oriental Origin

##### The Seven Wise Masters

[A lengthy description of the history of the text across many languages, built upon notes compiled by Douce]

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<sup>30</sup> This text is now most often found under the title *Roland and Vernagu*, or *Rouland and Vernagu*.

<sup>31</sup> These texts are now conventionally distinguished with the titles *Otuel a Knight* (Auchinleck), and *Otuel and Roland* (Fillingham, now BL MS ADD 37492). However, as they are not often printed there is some amount of variation and confusion.

<sup>32</sup> This is not the *Firumbras* found in either the Ashmole or the Fillingham manuscript, but that now found under variations of the title *The Sultan of Babylon*. The manuscript is now owned by Princeton University. It was recently edited by Alan Lupack in the collection of *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances* for TEAMS.

The following fragment is generally taken from the fragment in the Auchinleck MS., as being the most ancient copy now known to exist, and that the conclusion has been made up from the MS. in the Cotton library already mentioned [Galbe.E.9]. (III: 21)

#### Miscellaneous Romances

##### Florice and Blaunche flour

We may be almost certain that the Spanish poem is nothing more than a translation or imitation of a French metrical romance, composed probably in the 13th century, and rendered into English in the early part of the 14th; a copy of the latter being still extant in the Auchinleck MS. It is in a very imperfect state, consisting of 850 lines only, which probably formed little more than half of the entire poem; but as it agrees exactly with M. de Tressan's abridgement [of a late 16<sup>th</sup> century French text, translated from an early 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish text], I have made use of that work for the purpose of completing the story. (III: 101-2).

##### Robert of Cysille

A copy of the following romance is preserved in the public library at Cambridge, MSS. More. 690.36, and another in the Harleian MSS. 1701 from which my transcript was made. It was never printed. (III:142)

##### Sir Isumbras

The following romance is abridged from the MS. copy in the library of Caius College A 9, collated with printed copy in Mr. Garrick's plays. (III: 153)

##### Sir Triamour

The abstract of the following romance has been made from the copy printed by William Copland, contained in the British Museum (Garrick's Plays, K.10). (III: 176)

##### The Lyfe of Ipomydon

This romance is contained in MS. No. 2252 of the Harleian library in the British Museum. (III: 208)

### Sir Eglamour of Artois

The following abstract is taken from Garrick's Plays, K.10...Another printed copy is preserved in the Bodleian. There are three MSS. copies of this romance, one of which is in the Cotton library, Calig.A.12; another in the public library Cambridge, No. 690; and a third in Bishop Percy's folio. (III: 257)

### Lay le Fraine

This antient and curious little poem, translated from the French of Marie, is preserved in the Auchinleck M.S. It is mutilated in two places, and wants the conclusion; these defects, however, are unimportant with respect to the story, which I have supplied from the French. (III: 282)

### Sir Eger, Sir Grahame, and Sir Gray-steel

It was printed (perhaps at Aberdeen) in 1711, and from a copy of this date, in the possession of Mr. Douce, the following abstract is taken. (III: 299)

### Sir Degoré

This romance is of high antiquity, being preserved in the Auchinleck MS. It is also contained in Bishop Percy's folio. The following abstract is made from a transcript of the black letter copy in Garrick's collection (K.ix). (III: 347)

### Roswal and Lillian

[I] have only seen a single copy of it, which was kindly communicated to me by Mr. Douce. (III: 371)

### Amys and Amylion

Our English version is very antient, since a copy of it is preserved in the Auchinleck MS.; but the following abstract was taken from a MS. in the collection of Mr. Douce. (III: 384)

*Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Centuries: Published from Ancient Manuscripts. With An Introduction, Notes, and a Glossary by Henry Weber, Esq.*

#### Kyng Alisaunder

Only two copies of “the Lyfe of Alisaunder” are in our public libraries, besides a fragment, containing about 200 lines of the conclusion, in the Auchinleck MS., agreeing very nearly with the other MSS. One of them is in the Bodleian MS. Laid, I. 74. fol. It is evidently of the fourteenth century, and written upon vellum, in a hand generally very plain. There are many parts, however, which have greatly suffered, and some passages are become entirely illegible. Others, for what reason I know now, have been completely erased. Fortunately they are supplied by a second copy, which exists in a MS., preserved in the library of Lincoln’s Inn (No. 150), which, from the language, appears to be of an age not much, if at all, posterior to the former. It was copied, and intended for publication by Mr Park, but he was deterred from proceeding in the work, by discovering that a large portion, of above 1200 lines (v. 4772-5989), was entirely wanting, besides a great number of verses dispersed in different parts of the romance. These have been supplied from the Bodleian MS. by the editor, so that the present edition is as perfect as the two existing MSS. could make it. (xxxvii-xxxviii)

#### Sir Cleges

The only copy of Sir Cleges extant, to my knowledge, is in a folio MS., lately added to the Advocates’ Library, on paper, apparently of the beginning of the fifteenth century, and containing besides Mandeville’s Travels, and Occleve’s Speculum Regis. The end of Sir Cleges is imperfect in the MS.; but as only part of one stanza seems to be wanting, the editor has attempted to supply the defect in the rough



style of the original. His supplement will be found inclosed in brackets. (xli)  
[Adv. 19.1.11]

#### Lai le Freine

The only existing copy is in the Auchinleck MS., in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh; but unfortunately, like every other poem in that valuable collection, it has suffered mutilation on account of the illumination prefixed to it....In order to render the perusal less unpleasant, these defects have been supplied from the French original by the editor, as nearly as possible in the style of the original. His attempt was kindly revised by Mr. Ellis. (xlii)

#### Richard Coer de Lion

It is much to be lamented, that no perfect Ms. of the English romance has been discovered. The most ancient fragment is contained in the Auchinleck MS. in the Advocates' Library.... About one half of the romance, containing the latter part, occurs in a MS. now in the possession of the Marquis of Stafford, but many of the leaves have suffered so much as to be utterly illegible. Other fragments occur in No. 4690 of the Harleian MSS., and in another in the possession of Mr. Douce. The library of Caius's College, Cambridge, contains the most perfect copy, wanting, however, several leaves. From a transcript made from this MS., and supplied in one place from Mr. Douce's fragment, and in three others from the printed copy, by Mr. Ellis, who kindly permitted the editor to retranscribe it, the copy in the present work has been printed. The passages supplied, will be found specified in the various readings, and their loss in the Caius' College MS. is the less to be regretted, as, from some collations in other parts, the MS. and the printed copy were found to differ in nothing but a phraseology and spelling, rather more modern in the latter. (xlvii-xlviii)

### The Lyfe of Ipomydon

The MS. 2252, in the Harleian Library, contains the only perfect copy of Ipomydon, from which the text is printed. (lii)

### Amis and Amiloun

This is the manner in which the names of these faithful brothers in arms are uniformly spelt in the Auchinleck copy; which being the most ancient, has been followed in the present edition, as far as it goes. In a perfect MS. copy *penes* Mr Douce, they are called Amys and Amelion. From this MS., which appears to be about a century later, defects of the former, consisting of the first 96 lines, and the conclusion (from v.2384 to the end), have been supplied by the kind permission of its learned possessor. (lii-liii)

### The Proces of the Seuyn Sages

It has been found necessary to employ both the ancient copies in forming the present text. The Auchinleck copy is deficient at the beginning and the end, but it is nearly a century older than the perfect one, contained in a folio MS. in the Cotton library, (Galba E.9.) which contains besides the beautiful romance of Ywaine and Gawaine, and which was judged by Ritson to have been written in the time of Richard II. (lv-lvi)

### Octouian Imperator

The present romance, which has been printed chiefly on account of the singularity of its stanza, and its giving a specimen of the Hampshire dialect, nearly as it is still spoken, occurs in the Cotton library, (Calig.A.12) and among Bishop More's MSS. at Cambridge, (NO. 690). (lviii)

### Sir Amadas

This and the following poem are contained in a small quarto paper MS., lately purchased into the Advocates' library, (Jac.V.7.27) and no other copy of either of them is known known to exist. (lx)

The Huntyng of the Hare

Jac.V.7.27